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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

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Self-Promotion Is Not My Thing

If I were good at sports, I'd be the guy who would score the goal, skip the celebration, and act like it was no big deal. I don't like bragging or being the center of attention. But as a journalist and content creator, sometimes it is hard to remember that you need to celebrate your wins and share your successes with others. So let's do this.

First and foremost, *Game Informer*'s success is the result of our staff (current and former), as well as the readers who support us. But we create so many things, and I sometimes do a poor job of letting you know about all that we do. So, if you love reading *Game Informer Magazine*, have I got a newsflash for you: We have lots of other ways to enjoy our team as we create a ton of other things for you to enjoy.

We have a website, gameinformer.com, that holds many wonders. We create *The Game Informer Show* every week and are closing in on 500 episodes. It's a weekly podcast (available in video and audio formats) where we chat about the games you read about in each issue, answer questions from the community, and generally engage in silliness.

We have a show called *Replay* that just had its 10-year anniversary. That's where we play classic (and not-so-classic) games every Friday afternoon. We also have a video program called *New Gameplay Today* that shows lots of fun footage, and broadcasts live when the time is right.

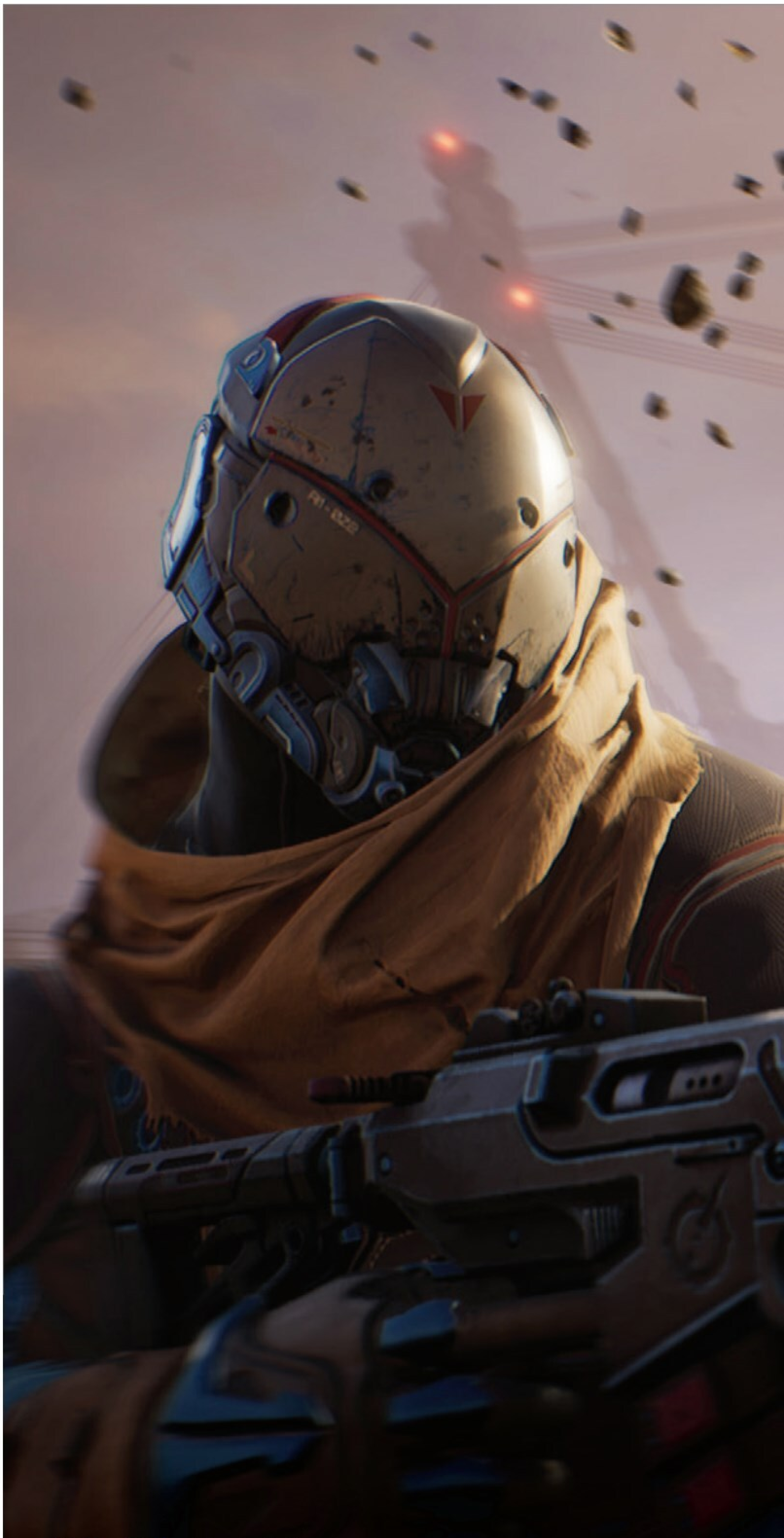
And that's just the beginning. We do other video productions, including a ton of support content for our cover stories. We even have a merch store so you can get cool *Game Informer* T-shirts and hoodies. So head online, follow us on social media for updates, and join us in the celebration of games. We are there for you, and would love to have you be a part of our community.

If that didn't sell you, then come listen to me say dumb things on *The Game Informer Show*. I promise I won't disappoint on that front.

See you there.

Cheers,

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter



36 **Outriders**
People Can Fly has been developing shooters since the company was founded in 2002. The genre has changed since the days of Painkiller, and the studio has been keeping pace as games have become more sophisticated. People Can Fly's latest, Outriders, combines solid shooting mechanics with loot and RPG elements – with a slick sci-fi setup. We visited the Warsaw-based studio to get a deeper look at the upcoming title. ***by Jeff Cork***

10 **The Next Big Sport?**
We discuss Call of Duty League's inaugural season and future plans with commissioner Johanna Faries.

14 **The Reinvention Of Mother**
Nintendo's cult classic RPG series is inspiring fans to make their own game – Oddity.

18 **It's Always Sunny In The Games Industry**
It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia creators take on the games industry in Apple TV+'s *Mythic Quest: Raven's Banquet*.

24 **Electrifying Emergent Stories From Online Worlds**
These tales of gamers in online worlds have to be read to be believed.

28 **Interview: Vince Zampella**
We talk with Respawn's co-founder and CEO about Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order, Apex Legends, and more.

06 **Feedback**

16 **Gamer: 300 Doses Of Kryptonite**

17 **The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly**

22 **Top Ten Levels You Play As A Kid**

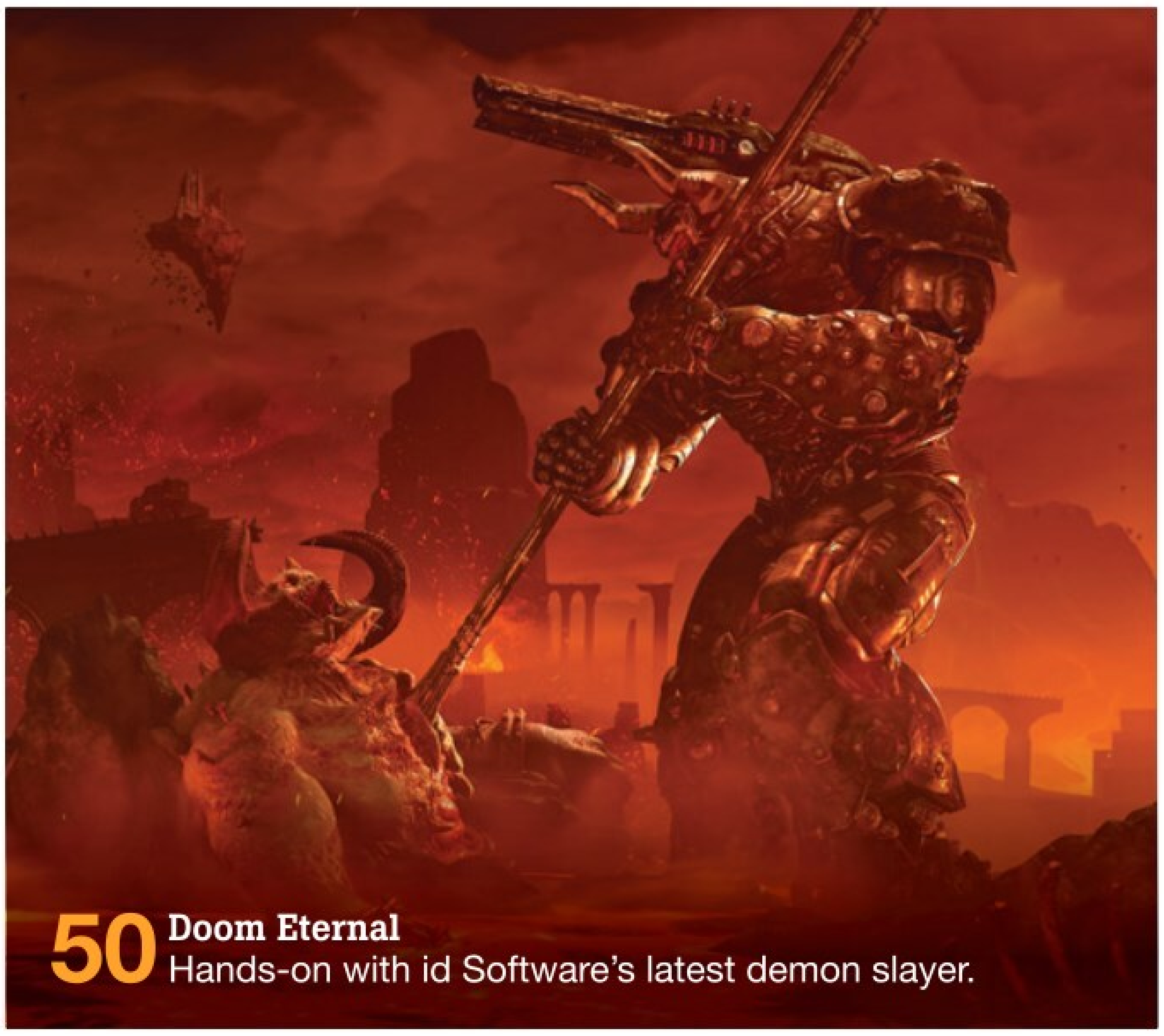
30 **Gear: The Best Gear From CES 2020, Funkoverse Tabletop Strategy Game, Action Figures To Add To Your Collection, DualShock 4 Back Button Attachment Hardware Review**

62 **Previews**

74 **Reviews**

82 **Classic: Chrono Trigger**

84 **Game Over: The Year 2020 According To Video Games**



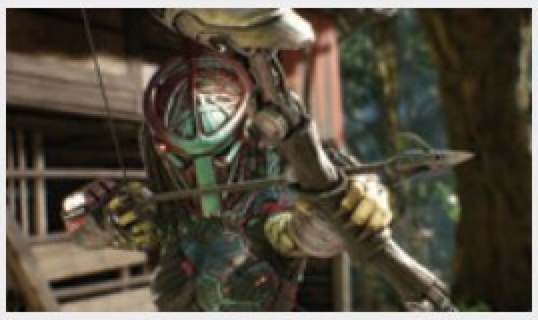
50 **Doom Eternal**
Hands-on with id Software's latest demon slayer.

54 **Final Fantasy VII Remake**
Get up to speed on this ambitious and exciting remake.

58 **Pokémon Sword & Shield Expansion Pass**
New lands and adventures await.

62 **The Division 2: Warlords Of New York**
The game's latest narrative-based DLC deals with a deadly biochemical attack unleashed on the city.

64 **MLB The Show 20**
First details on the March title, from gameplay to mode additions.

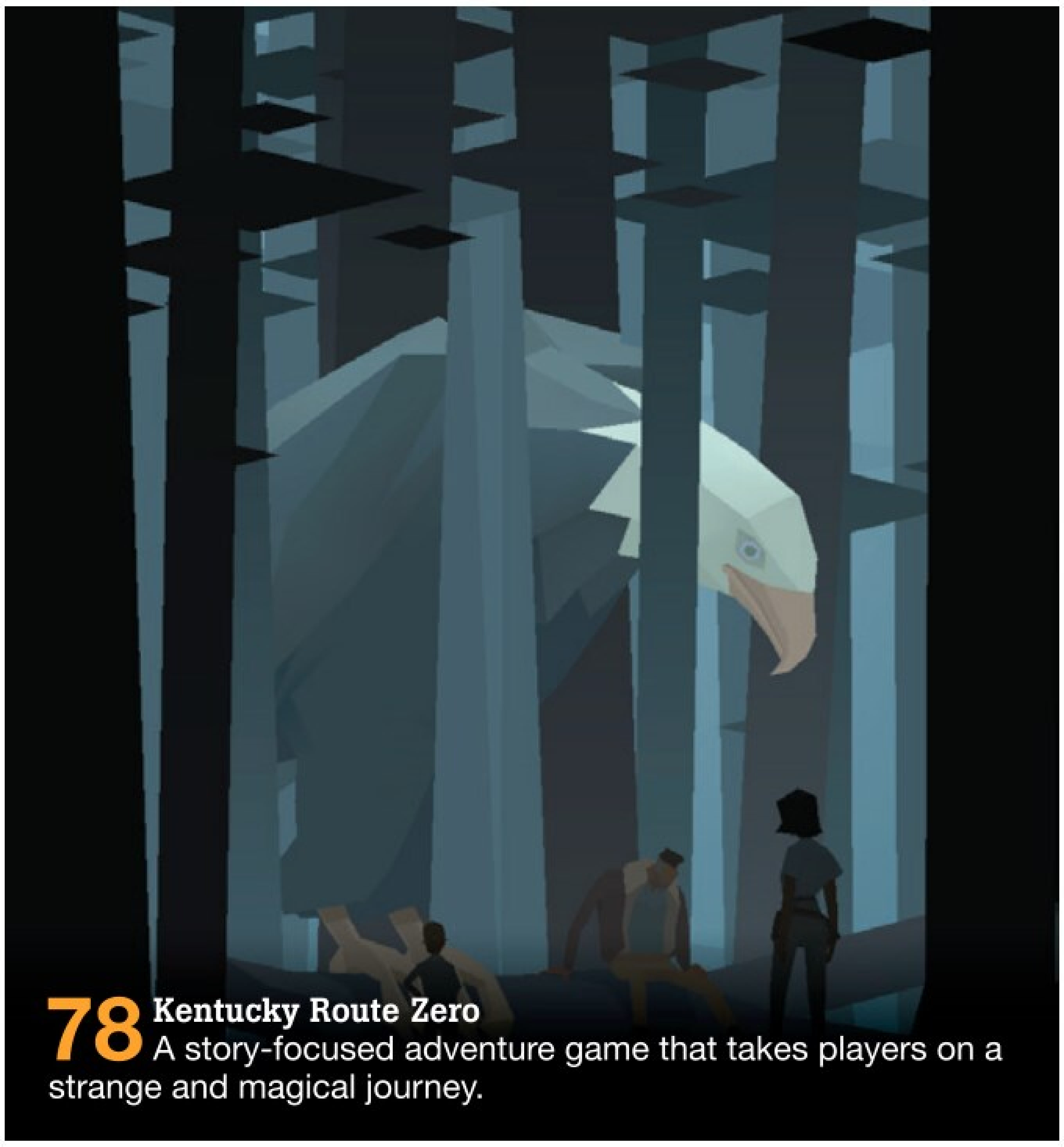


65 **Predator: Hunting Grounds**
Hunt or be hunted in this asymmetrical cooperative multiplayer title.

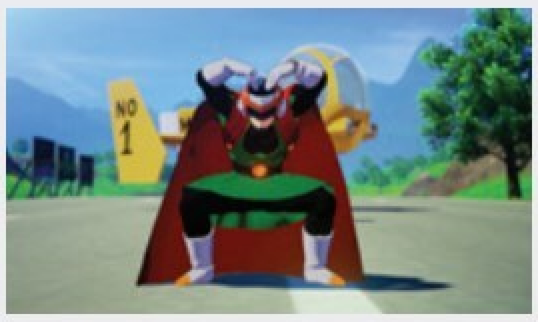
66 **West Of Dead**
Raw Fury's twin-stick roguelike uncovers the monstrosities that lie in the shadows.

68 **Tainted Grail**
Turn-based card-based battles, moral choices, and more color this Arthurian open-world RPG.

75 **Journey To The Savage Planet**
Inauspicious beginnings lead to a satisfying first-person adventure.



78 **Kentucky Route Zero**
A story-focused adventure game that takes players on a strange and magical journey.



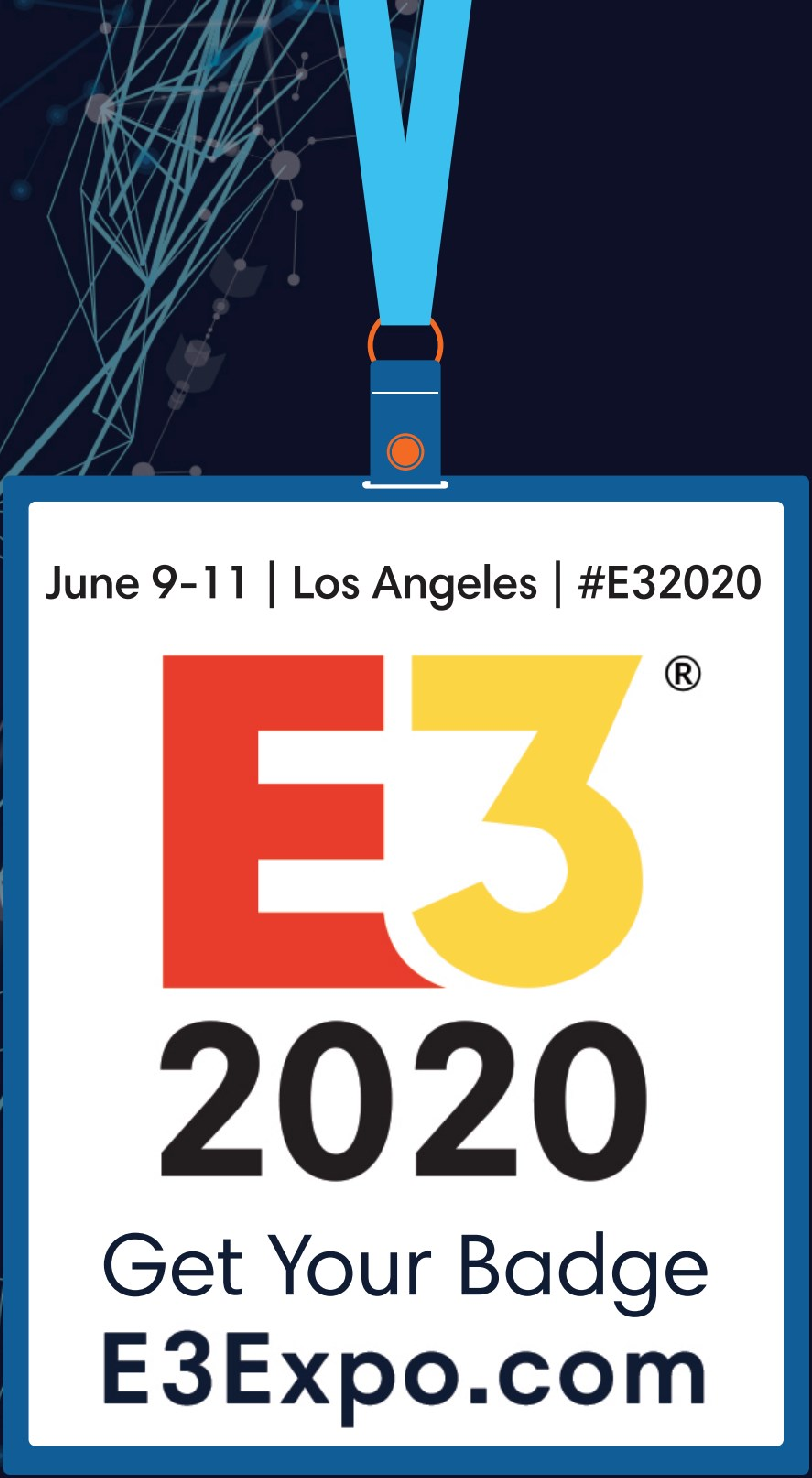
76 **Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot**
This retelling of DBZ sagas works better in some areas than others.

77 **Kingdom Hearts III Re Mind**
The DLC is more retread than Renaissance.

79 **To The Moon**
A powerful rumination on what could have been.

games index

Axiom Verge 2 73
Chrono Trigger. 82
Cris Tales 71
Disintegration 72
Division 2:
  Warlords of New York, The . . . 62
Doom Eternal. 50
Dragon Ball Z: Kakorat 76
Final Fantasy VII Remake 54
Journey to the Savage Planet . . 75
Kentucky Route Zero 78
Kingdom Hearts III Re Mind 77
Lego Builder's Journey 80
Liberated. 70
MLB the Show 20 64
Oddity 14
Outriders 36
Pathfinder: Wrath of
  the Righteous 69
Pokémon Sword & Shield 58
Predator: Hunting Grounds 65
Roundguard. 67
SaGa Scarlet Grace:
  Ambitions 80
Superman 64. 16
Tainted Grail 68
To the Moon 79
West of Dead. 66



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feedback

Our readers offer up further insight into PlayStation's past, are eager to get their hands on Magic: Legends and Cyberpunk 2077, and tell us which games we missed on our Top 50 Games of 2019 list …

Magic: Legends

I had no idea a new Magic game was coming out, and it looks awesome. I've played the Magic: The Gathering card game since I was in middle school and have always wanted that universe to expand in video games, but it seemed like the only solution developers had was to adapt the card game to digital. Magic: Legends is the perfect idea. Making it like Diablo is a great way to represent the creatures and story. I can't wait for this game to come out! Thanks for the info.

Reggie Wilson
Nashville, TN

I don't know how you do it, *Game Informer*, but I looked at your cover, saw Magic: Legends, and thought, "What a waste of paper," and then I read the story. Now I want the game badly. Thank you for finding another game I hadn't heard of and telling me why I should care about it.

Jill "A Reader For Life" Baker
via email

I know people complain about there being too many games in certain genres, and that developers follow trends too closely, but most games nowadays are giving us plenty of bang for our buck. The days of buying a $60 game and beating it in three hours are well behind us, and that's a good thing. Yes, Magic: Legends looks like a dozen other games out there, but that's not a bad thing, especially seeing how they are making it unique with the card ideas from the license. I look forward to putting at least 100 hours into that game.

James Preston
via email

Developers have been doing great things with licensed product recently, and Magic: Legends looks to be another exciting option for players to jump into. To our reader's point of developers chasing trends, that isn't a bad thing. As much as we appreciate seeing developers innovate, we also adore specific genres. Getting more high-quality action/RPGs is a great thing, and having one of those games set in the world of Magic: The Gathering is also a boon.

Why Do Games Get Delayed?

If a movie company announces a release date, it comes out on that date. If a game company announces one, there's like a 50-percent chance that it doesn't come out on that day and is instead delayed. Final Fantasy VII Remake was delayed a month. Marvel's Avengers was pushed back until September. This is super frustrating for me. I plan out my yearly gaming budget and time commitment to each game I'm buying. A delay on something like Marvel's Avengers is catastrophic since it slid nearly into the busy holiday season. I don't know if I'll buy it now. My money (and time) will instead go to PlayStation 5. Help me out, *Game Informer*: Why do delays happen?

Samantha Hsu
Orlando, FL

You are totally right about the movie and game comparison. If a film is delayed or canceled, it usually happens well before a release date is announced. Game development is a different beast altogether. We often hear developers say that a game doesn't show its true colors until the final stretch of development, and even then, it isn't always known how much polish will be needed. Game developers are trailblazers that experiment and try new things – which could lead to a project shifting gears mid-development. The goal is to ship something that is fun and polished, and the release date is often a moving target. Publishers don't want to delay games, but they also want people to know they are coming soon. We don't see an easy solution other than waiting longer to announce the date.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Top 10 Games Of The Decade

I really liked your list, but I think two games are missing. I'm not a fan in any way of these games, but their impact on the industry is undeniable. The two games I'm talking about are Fortnite and League of Legends. They are constantly the number one and two most streamed and viewed games, so what gives?

Samuel Shellhammer
via email

We had a lengthy discussion about both of these games (and many others), but the staff collectively decided that they didn't beat out the other games we listed. Fortnite is arguably the biggest game out there, and League of Legends has been a mainstay, but they didn't resonate as much with *Game Informer* editors. The beauty of lists is that they reflect the interests of the people writing them, and our picks do a nice job of echoing a decade worth of *Game Informer* magazines.

Even More PlayStation History

I enjoyed the feature on PlayStation history [from issue 321], and am a big fan of the platform and especially the games it brought. However, I do want to point out something in the early development of related technology that was missed in the article (possibly because it would have made the feature convoluted).

In 1987, I joined a developer/publishing house that was part of the secret Philips project you mention in the article (Nintendo pulls out of Sony deal and joins the Philips project). At that time *Sony* was a key player in the Philips project. It involved unheard-of technology at the time, with unprecedented micro-processing power and capacity for game/software content. It was to use CDs as the distribution media before CD-ROM existed. The first emulator hardware arrived at developers in the form of two massive boxes stacked to make a refrigerator-sized appliance.

Around late 1987/early 1988, Sony pulled out of that project. In the wake of that move, the project seemed to become a revolving door of developers and hardware partners. Most were impressed with the emulators, but the instability left by Sony's departure created a vacuum that effectively sucked the momentum out of the project. That project was Philips CD-i, and even Nintendo couldn't save the day.

Robert
via email

Let's add Microsoft to the mix to make it even more confusing. The partnership between Philips and Sony was announced at Microsoft's First International Conference on CD-ROM in Seattle in 1986. Old newspaper reviews of the show make the announcement sound like a complete surprise. The Philips CD-i may not have changed the world of gaming, but it did help propel CD technology forward from its dramatic reveal, which just happened to have Microsoft be involved in a lesser, and at the time, unknowing role.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

Repeat question from last month: "The new generation of games is so close. I fear Cyberpunk 2077 is going to get delayed a year and only appear on those machines. Thoughts?"

Your fear of the game being delayed came true. It's now hitting on September 17. The good news: It's still slated for current-gen machines.

Do you think we'll ever see PlayStation games on an Xbox?

For the longest time our answer was, "No, don't be silly," but the recent agreement between Sony and the Major League Baseball for MLB The Show will see the game on other systems possibly starting as early as 2021. So now the answer is, "Yes, but not every game."

Who's your main?

That's an impossible question to answer, so here's an impossible main we dreamed up: We rock a necro witch-doctor rogue tank specialist with a dash of berserker.

Best Comment:

"My analog stick was squeaking so I put lube on it and now it doesn't work."

Question Of The Month:

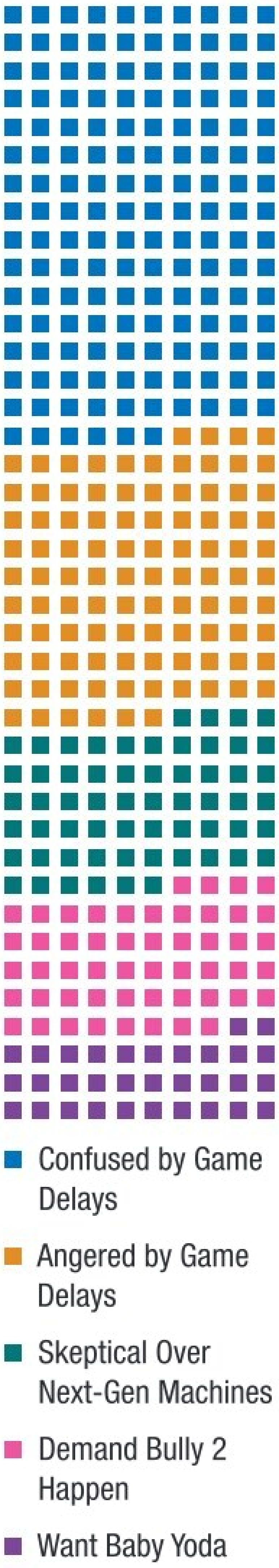
What are your thoughts on game delays?

gi spy

(Left) Leo Vader takes a break with Square Enix's Steven Ruygrok in this candid photograph taken in Poland. **(Right)** The current Game Informer crew gathers with their old co-workers, including PlayStation's Tim Turi, Crystal Dynamics' Meagan Marie, and Launcher's Elise Favis.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind

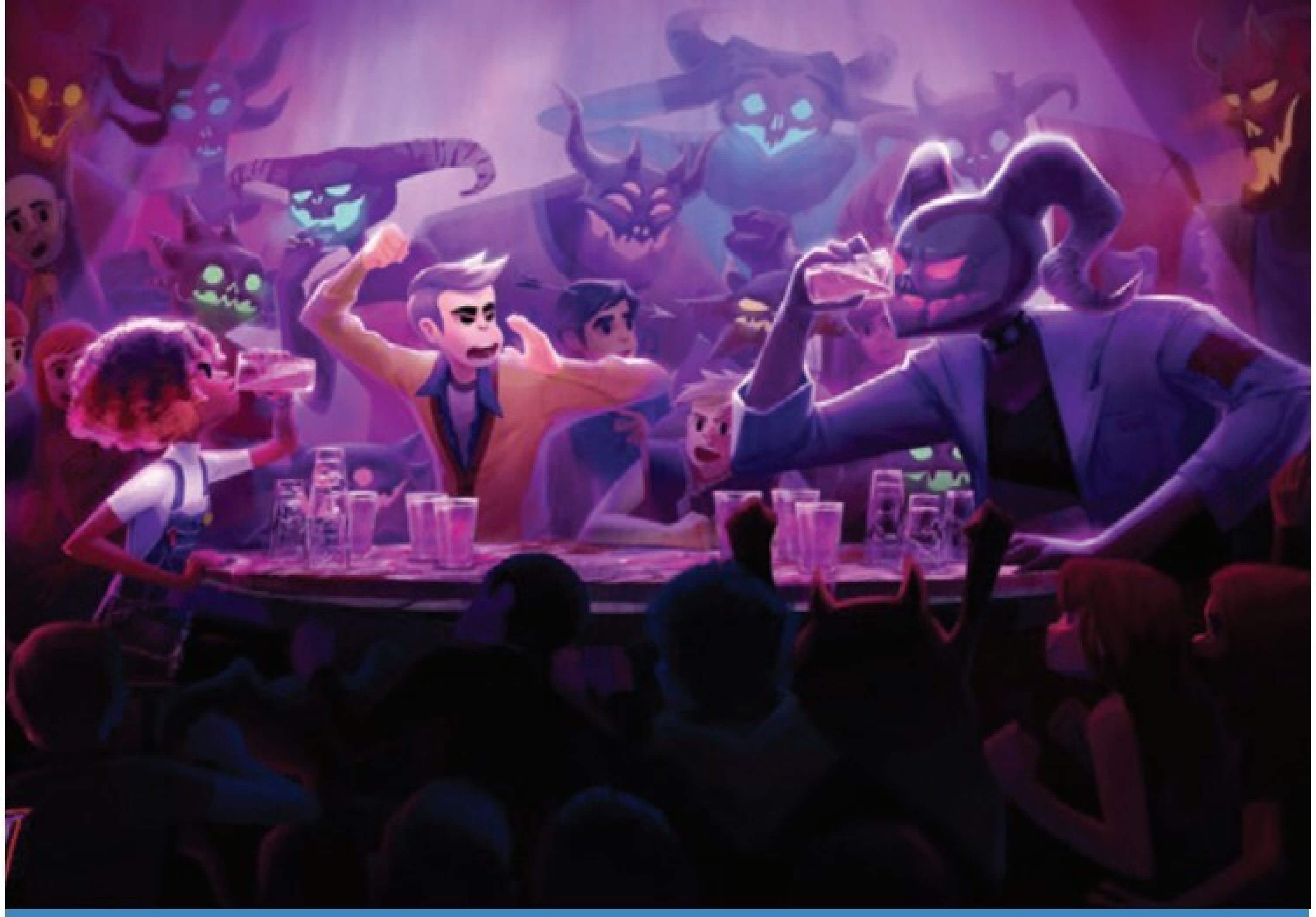


Should I Buy an Xbox One?

I'm so conflicted right now. I really want to get an Xbox One, but I don't know if I should wait for an Xbox Series X instead. I want to play stuff now and I fear the Series X is going to be expensive. Xbox One is on sale and seems to be getting cheaper each month. What say you, *GI*?

Tiffany O'Connor
via email

We don't have pricing details for Series X yet and we don't know the specifics of backwards compatibility, but we do know that Xbox's next-generation machines won't have exclusive first-party games, meaning Halo Infinite will play on both the Xbox One and next-gen hardware. That will change over time, however, and we don't know if third-party publishers are looking at making games exclusive to the new hardware. It's a tricky question to answer, but you are probably right in assuming the Series X will be more expensive than where the Xbox One is at now. If you're hungry for games right now, we say play them now.



What Our Top 50 Got Wrong

In issue 322 we asked our readers if we missed any great games on our Top 50 Games of 2019 list, and also wanted to know if we put some on that shouldn't have been there. Here are their responses …

You put Death Stranding and Untitled Goose Game on your list, yet didn't give Rage 2, My Friend Pedro, or Void Bastards spots? Come on, *Game Informer*. Stop listening to marketing firms and pick good games.

Jason Williamson

The one game I was surprised to see not on the list was Hypnospace Outlaw. That game is charming and weird and just different. Otherwise, great list! I can't wait to dive into a dozen of these games in 2020.

Sarah Clarke

This game hit early in the year and didn't make many waves, but Anno 1800 from Ubisoft is a wonderful simulation game. I'm guessing not many people at *GI* played it, and that's okay. I totally agree that Control is Game of the Year – you got that one right. Thanks for the amazing publication.

Amelia Woodward

Why did Dreams make the list? Isn't that just game-making software? I would have taken that off and put Afterparty instead. If you want a game with great writing, look no further.

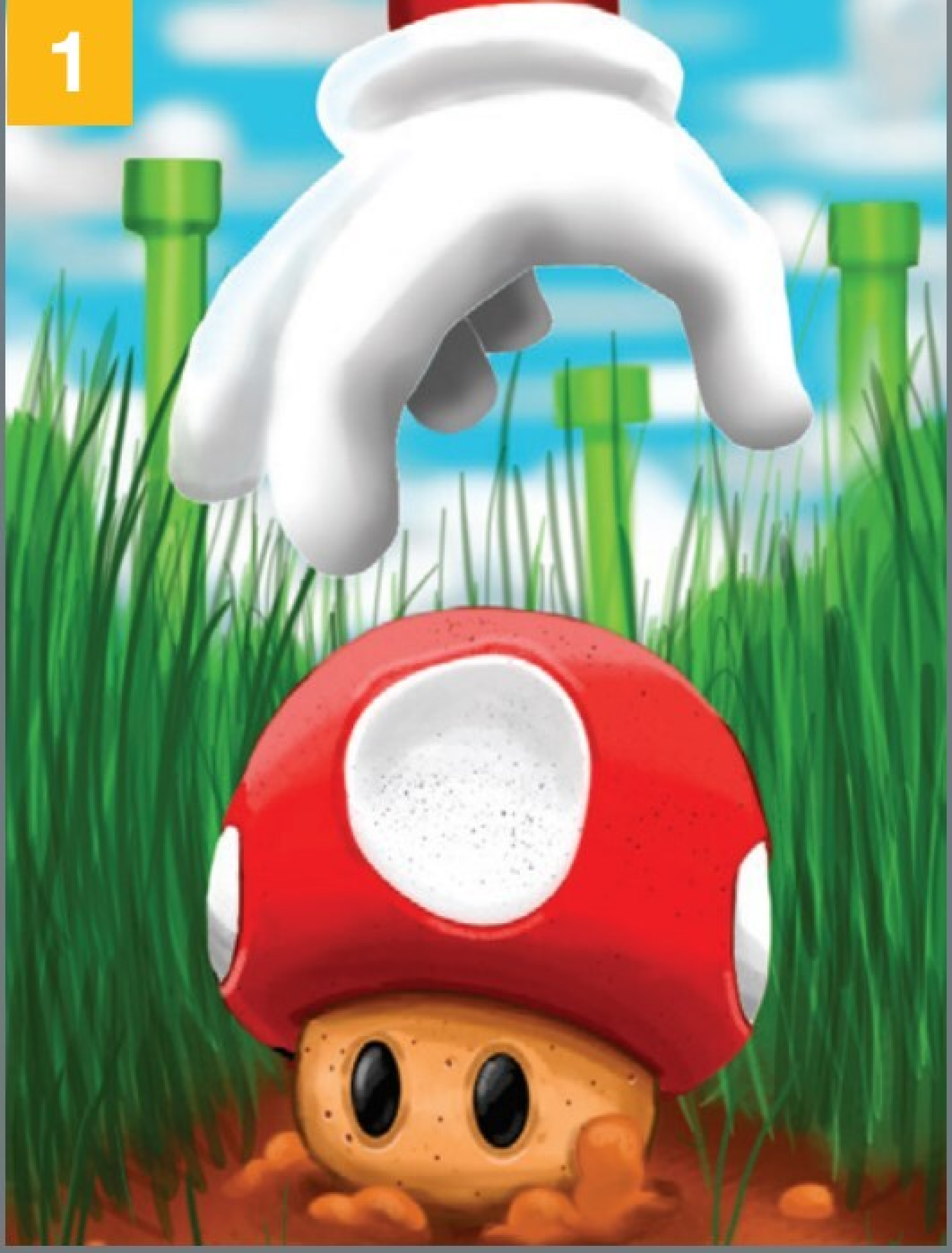
Rodney Velasquez

(Left) HomeRun PR's Damien Sarrazin and Owlcat Games' Alexander Mishulin take a tour of Game Informer's vault. **(Right)** Ben throws up the devil horns with Doom Eternal creative director Hugo Martin and executive producer Marty Stratton.

DOOM
ETERNAL

WINNER

1 Wilfredo Rivera Jr.
This isn't Toad, right? We'll all just pretend this is just an ordinary mushroom. With eyes.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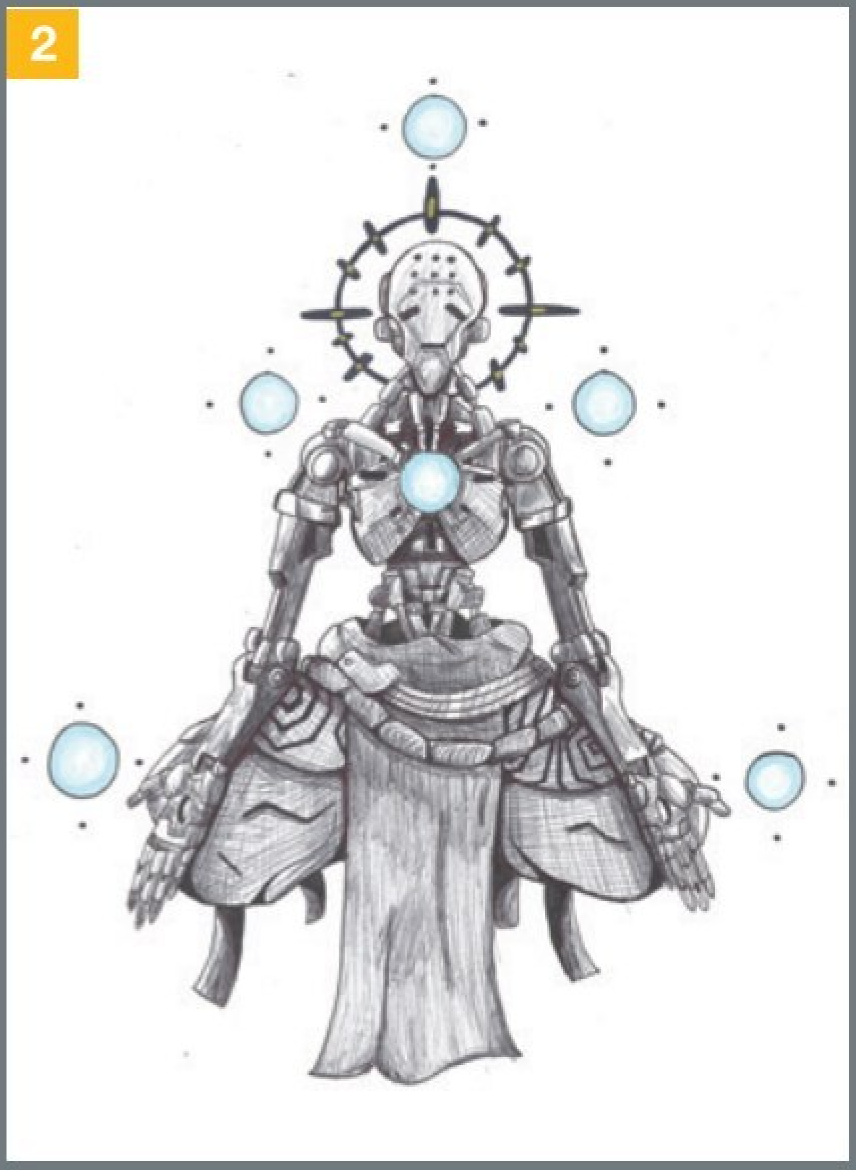
2 Hana Parece
Even after all these years, Zenyatta hasn't lost his chill.

3 Heavenly Love Hughes
Believe it or not, Fallout 76 can inspire something other than online snark. Here's proof!

4 Christiano Lee
The Prisoner seems pleased with his recent weight loss. Put on those goal pants, you've earned them!

5 Lily Sailer, Age 10
Amaterasu may be the sun goddess, but sometimes she needs to just be her doggy self.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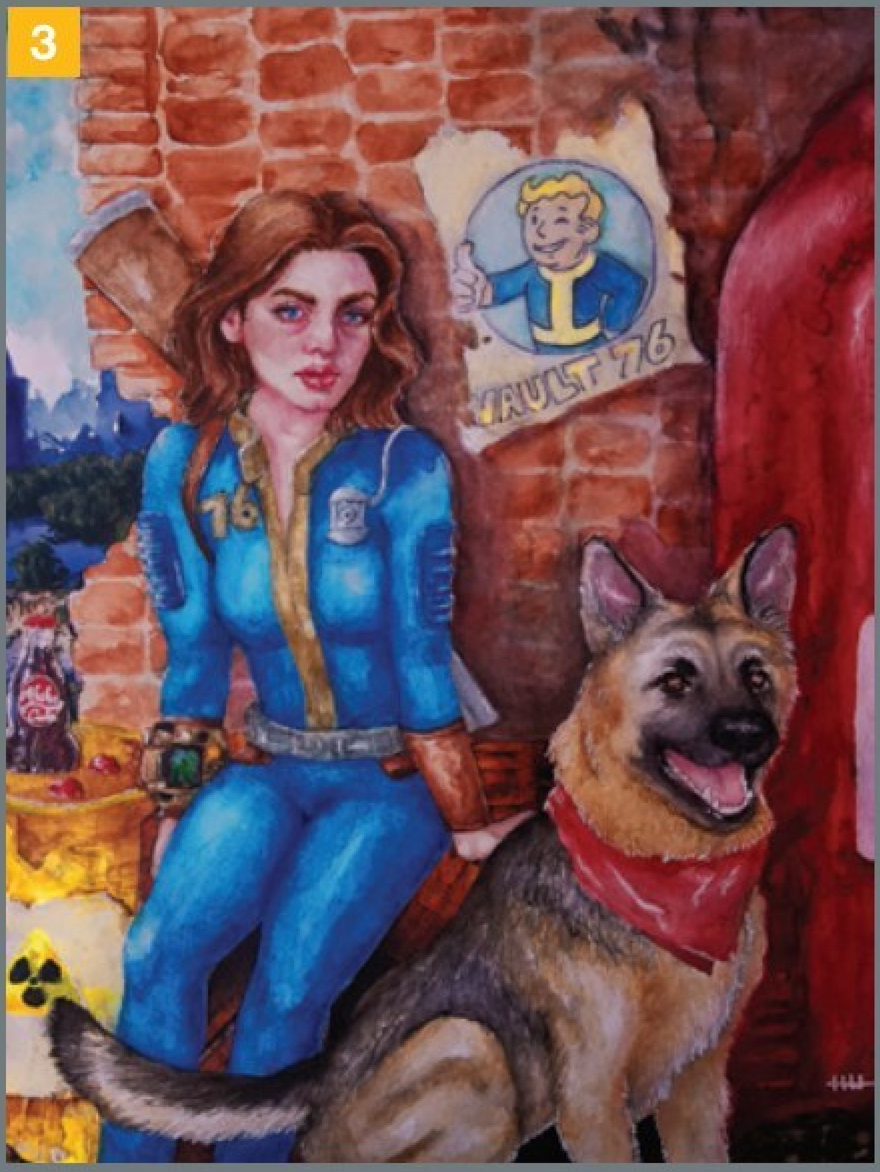
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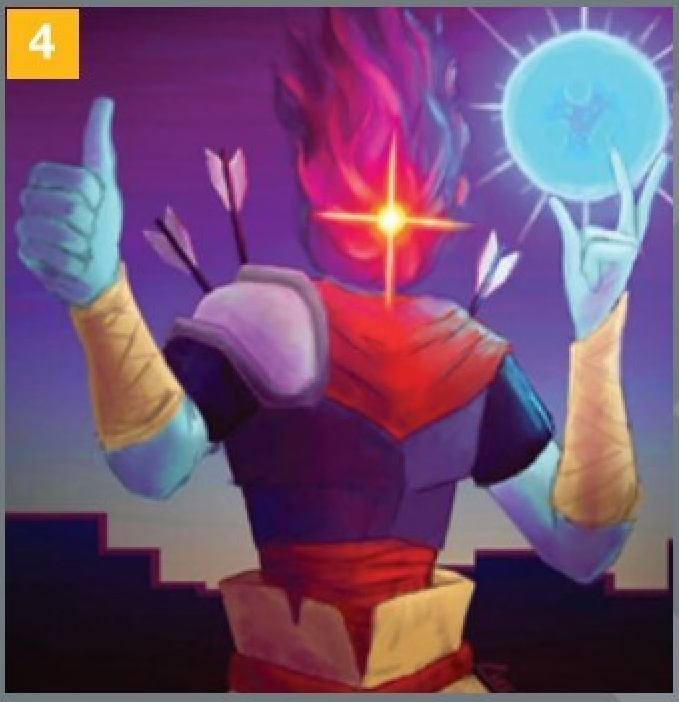
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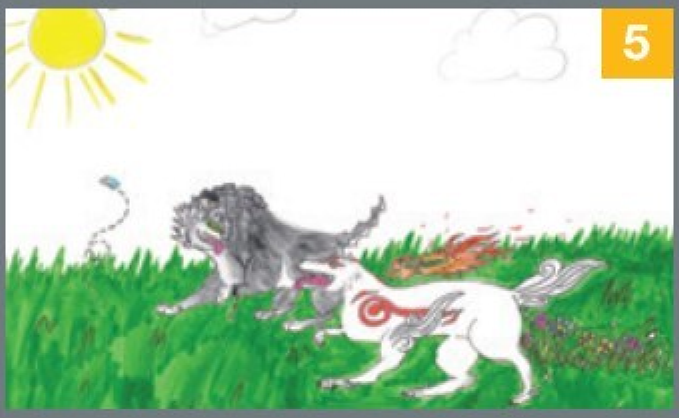
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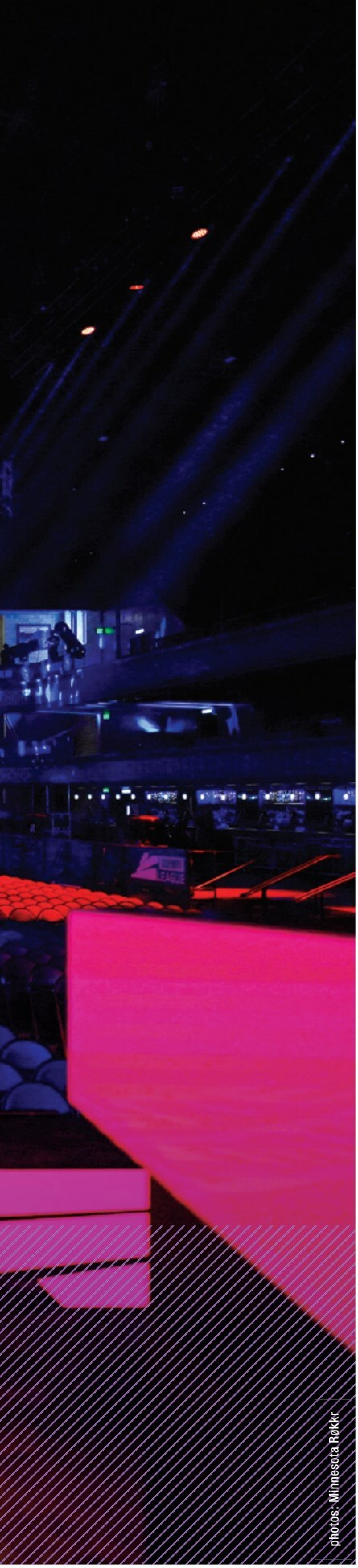
Ahead of Call of Duty League opening weekend, we visited the practice facility of the Minnesota Røkkr.

LAUNCH WEEKEND
ARMORY
RØKKR

The Next Big Sport?

Under a newly formed league, Call of Duty is looking to take on mainstream sports

by Andrew Reiner



photos: Minnesota Røkkr

Call of Duty has a long and storied esports history. Pro matches date back well over a decade, to a time when teams like FeaR and EnVy were dominating tournaments, and fans were in awe of the speed and precision of Matthew "Nadeshot" Haag and Patrick "Aches" Price.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare was a breakout game in 2007, not just for the role it played in redefining first-person shooters as we know them, but also in establishing the series as an esports staple. Each entry in Activision Blizzard's annualized franchise becomes a centerpiece for tournaments and leagues. From Major League Gaming to Call of Duty World League, Call of Duty has had one of the strongest pulses in esports, being streamed by millions of fans, and delivering just as much in prize money to its best teams.

Despite the immense success Call of Duty has already had in this domain, Activision sees a much bigger future for it, and is willing to cut ties with the past for a fresh start under a new league. All publishers with games in the esports arena are looking for ways to broaden appeal and become as viewer-friendly and approachable as other sports like the NBA or NFL. Year after year, we see esports' leading games League of Legends, Fortnite, Counter-Strike, and Activision Blizzard's own Overwatch try new things and collectively zone in on what is needed to convince newcomers, who may have not heard of these games, to tune in.

It could take decades before Call of Duty becomes just as big of a name in sports as the NFL, but those two names have become somewhat synonymous in the formation of Call of Duty League. In creating a new future for this competitive shooter, Activision Blizzard enlisted the talents of Johanna Faries as commissioner to oversee the business, product development, and worldwide efforts to grow the league. The announcement of Faries joining Call of Duty League was unexpected and turned heads since she was a key player at the NFL for over 12 years as one of the leaders of marketing, league-initiative strategy, consumer products, fan and business development, and more.

The allure of creating something from scratch intrigued Faries. "I think most people in the sports industry would say this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," she says. "Designing a new pro league, let alone a global pro-sports league, is not something that comes around that often. The mainstay that [Call of Duty] has been for so long, the cultural cachet it has as a gaming franchise and entertainment property, it's just something like no other. I knew from the start that it afforded us the opportunity to do something quite rare around esports, given its relevance, scale, and trajectory for growth. To build a very ambitious vision for esports on its back is a platform that is worth betting on."

Taking a cue from Overwatch, Call of Duty League was constructed as a city-based league with 12 professional teams forming for the first season. Interestingly, 10 of these teams are owned by companies that also run Overwatch teams. One of Call of Duty League's teams, the Minnesota Røkkr, also has ties to the NFL and is co-owned by the Wilf family, who run the Minnesota Vikings. Røkkr is a Norse word for "twilight," giving it a tie to the football affiliation, along with the color purple in the logo. The Røkkr also employ Brett Diamond as chief operating officer. He previously helped organize over a dozen Super Bowls when he worked at the NFL.

Although this league is a new venture, most of the other teams are built upon the previous successes Call of Duty has had in the competitive scene. Take team OpTic Gaming Los Angeles, for example. OpTic Gaming is one of the most successful and well-known entities in esports and didn't shy away from carrying its brand into the team name. Team OpTic also brings its pedigree over to the Chicago Huntsman, who are led by former OpTic head Hector "H3CZ" Rodriquez. The Seattle Surge are partially owned by Luminosity Gaming, another respected outlet, and almost every player on any of the team's rosters has had great success in other Call of Duty leagues and tournaments. Most of them were champions at one point.

Great care was taken to give each of the teams striking logos that people could immediately recognize, but also want plastered across merchandise to wear (of which there is already a sea of options to purchase for each team). When the players take the stage for matches, Activision gives them the option to wear either a hoodie or jersey – whatever they are most comfortable in.

Call of Duty League officially kicked off on January 24 in Minneapolis at The Armory, a venue that seats up to 8,000 people. This historic location was used for three days of Call of Duty gaming, putting all 12 teams on stage for two matches each. The Armory was decked out in Røkkr banners and logos with the color purple everywhere, giving the hometown team its proper welcome. The presentation that Activision put on was impressive. A giant screen hung over the stage right above the rows of monitors used by the athletes. Although the crowd at the venue viewed the black backs of the monitors, they saw plenty of animation from the athletes, who, upon victory, would sometimes leap from their chairs to point, yell at, or taunt the opposition. A full broadcast team was also on hand to shed details on the game, the athletes, and keep the atmosphere as festive as possible.

All of the Call of Duty League's matches are played five-versus-five in 2019's Modern Warfare, with each team having a few players on the bench that they can use as alternates for specific match types. The matches are played in a best-of-five series on Hardpoint, Search and Destroy, and Domination maps. Unlike most shooters featured in esports, these matches are not played on PC with mouse and keyboard, and instead take the less conventional route of PlayStation 4 with a controller.

In the league's first match between the Dallas Empire and Chicago Huntsmen, viewers tuned in to a Hardpoint battle that showed the true talents of the athletes, but ended up being challenging to follow. All esports shooters are trying to find ways to create broadcasts that are easy for anyone to watch, yet no one has come close to cracking that nut. Call of Duty fared about as poorly as a game can in this capacity. The broadcast switched cameras too often, bouncing between the game's standard first-person viewpoint to third-person, aerial shots, and even ground shots. Many of the camera changes came too late and either showed the player dead on the ground or at the moment they got hit by a grenade. Given how fast this game is, the person on the camera switchboard was obviously tracking a big play, but in the split second of switching, the moment had already transpired.

Most Hardpoint and Domination matches were difficult to follow. Both of these match types utilize player respawns and are about controlling areas on the map. The most viewable matches were Search and Destroy, which don't have respawns. Despite having some difficulty in framing the bomb activating and diffusing on camera, these matches created a nice degree of viewing tension whenever a team would drop to just one player. If the league can't figure out better ways to track the action, it may want to consider more Search and Destroy matches, or perhaps even implementing the easily viewable Gunflight into the mix – although it doesn't support 5v5, and is instead 3v3, 2v2, or 1v1.

The Huntsmen ended up with a commanding 3 to 1 victory over the Empire. In the league's first post-match interview, Huntsman player Alec "Arcitys" Sanderson joined an announcer on the stage, and immediately gave the league a WWE vibe by saying, "Yeah, I thought it was going to be a lot harder. These guys are all disgusting, so that s--- was easy." The crowd and announcer roared in surprise over the comment, but it didn't faze Arcitys. He just sat there and continued chewing his gum like nothing happened.

The biggest moment of controversy came at the end of the first day when Los Angeles Guerrillas were forced to forfeit a match to the Minnesota Røkkr. The forfeit came when Guerrillas player Andres Lacefield used a banned perk called Hardline that allowed a kill streak to be earned with one fewer kill. Hardline wasn't a factor in this match and it didn't affect the outcome of it at all.

Following the match, the Guerrillas offered a statement that didn't put the league in a positive light. "The Guerrillas accept the loss, and will continue to participate in all league competitions and obligations. However, enforcement of the violation was inconsistent with prior incidents of a similar nature." The statement went on to say, "Several league decisions were cause for additional concern. Competition delays added pressure on the last match of the night, and there is not a written standard regarding time between matches."

If anything, we saw a league in its infancy experiencing growing pains. Despite some elements that clearly need work, most of the weekend went off without a hitch. The big names in the sport made their mark, and roughly 45,000 to 85,000 thousand people tuned in for each match on YouTube, which holds the exclusive streaming rights. There's a good base to build from for the league and Call of Duty in general.

As the season unfolds and matches are played late into July, the top eight ranked teams and four wild-card spots will advance to the playoffs (yes, all teams are invited). During Call of Duty Championship Weekend – which Activision hasn't announced a date or city for as of this writing – the final six playoff teams will enter double-elimination battles leading to the final two teams going head to head. Over the season the teams will vie for the biggest cut from a $6 million prize pool.

"We're focused on building one of the coolest sports leagues out there," Faries says. "Over the course of the season, we're going to keep things fresh, keep things iterative, and continue to push the limits of what Call of Duty League can be in terms of entertainment, whether you are in the venue or are watching remotely."

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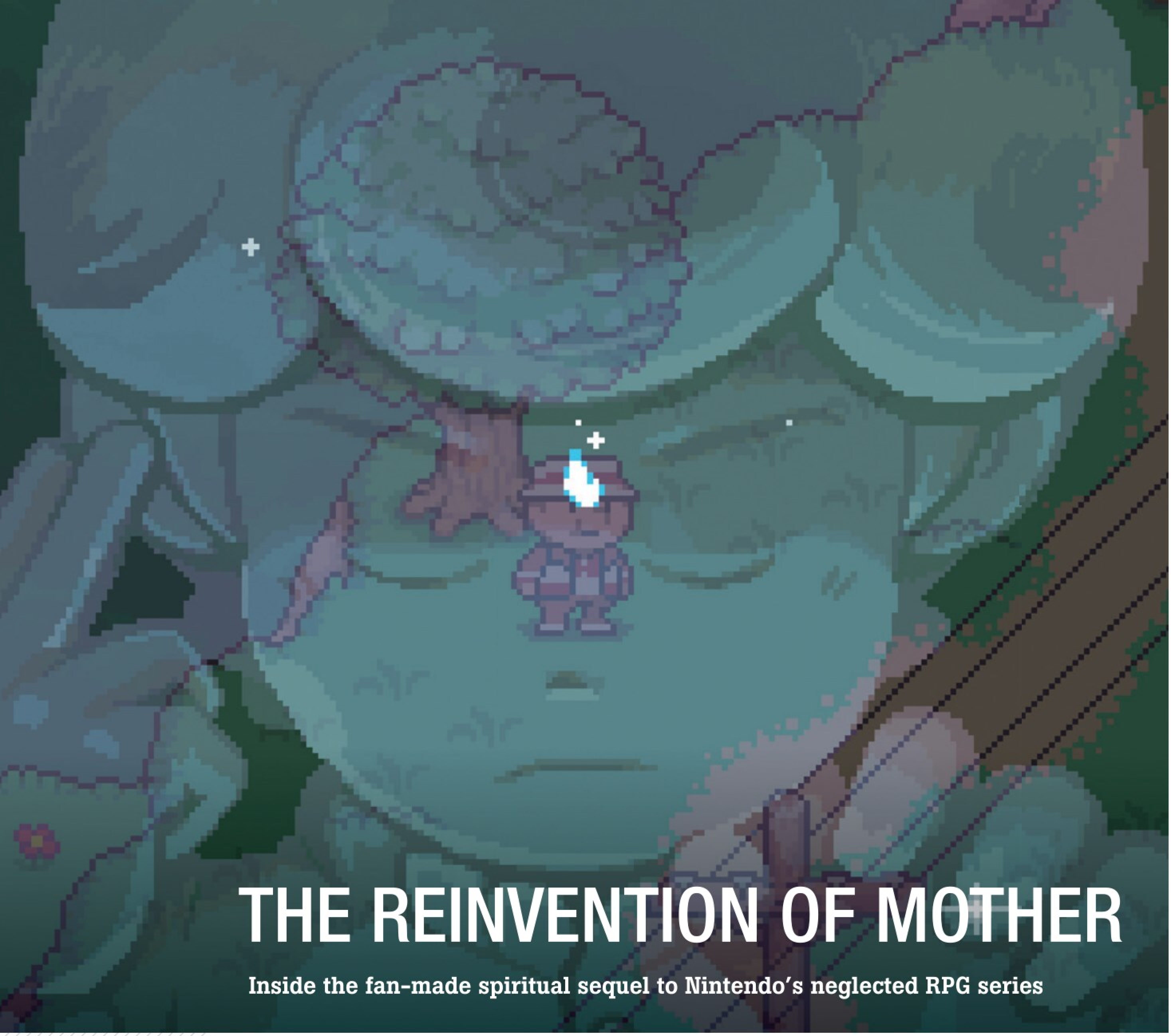


THE REINVENTION OF MOTHER

Inside the fan-made spiritual sequel to Nintendo's neglected RPG series

The Mother series may be one of the biggest missed opportunities in the gaming industry. This series of cutesy RPGs set within a goofball version of the late 20th-century United States has amassed a faithful following that praises the franchise for its humorous dialogue, zany world, and Peanuts-like cartoon visuals. Unfortunately, over the series' 30-year history, its games have failed to gain the level of commercial success its developer had hoped for; since the release of Mother 3 in 2006, creator Shigesato Itoi has repeatedly said that he has no plans to make a fourth entry. Cue the faithful fans. ***by Ben Reeves***

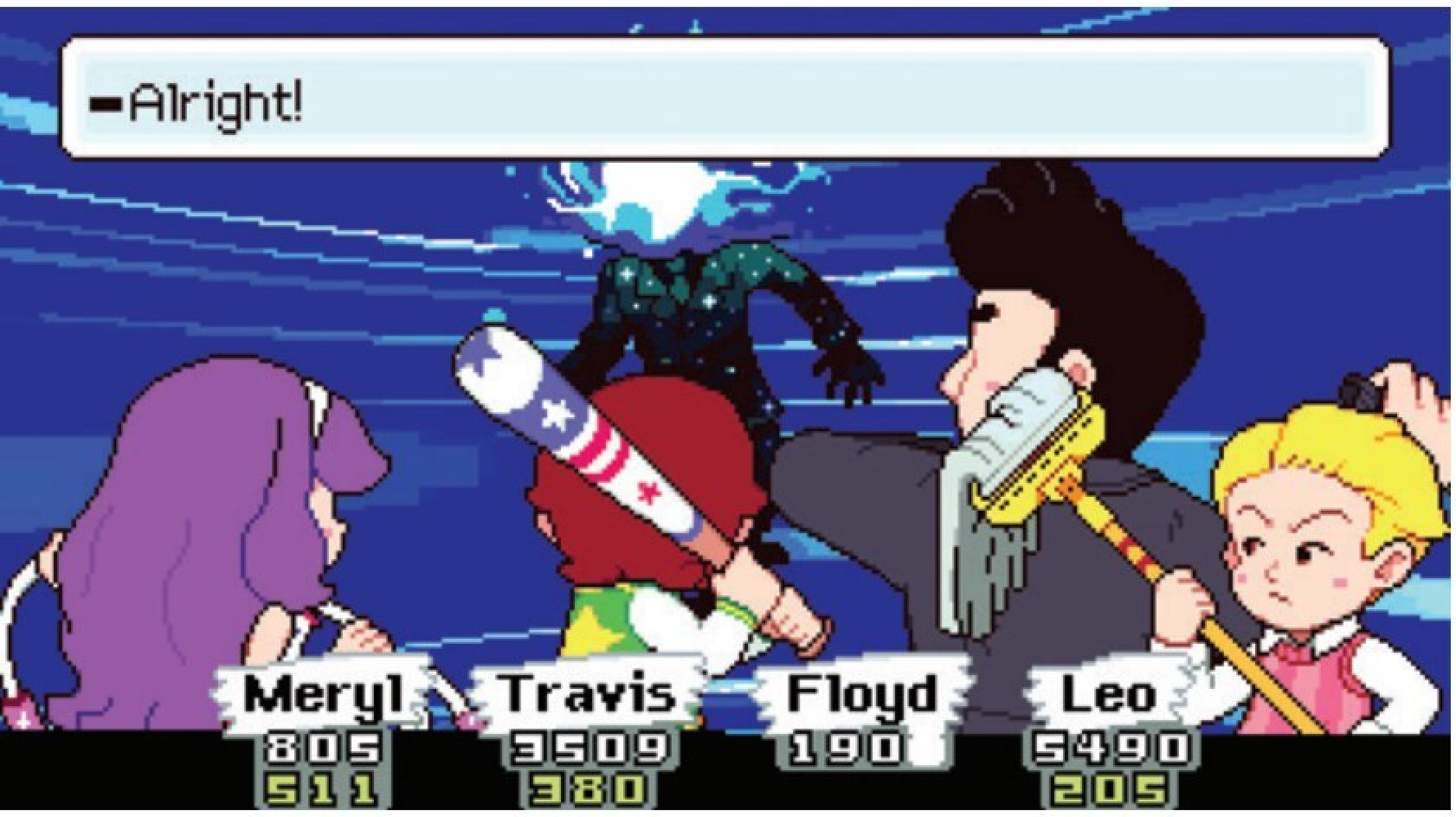
Around 2010, a group of Mother diehards gathered on a message board and began to dream about their vision for a theoretical Mother 4. Those discussions eventually escalated into actual development as this group of amateur designers started creating the Mother sequel Nintendo didn't seem interested in making. That project has slowly evolved over the years; the team initially called it Mother 4, but it has taken final form in a buzzworthy fan project called Oddity.

"When we're all done, I'd love to get into the ocean of details [about Oddity's development]," says the game's director, who prefers to go by the name Pastel. "A really cool project was started with some really cool people, it changed hands over its lifespan with people coming in and out, and it attracted people who got excited for the project in their own ways. I initially got into this project just giving advice on pixel art. A lot has happened since then."

In 2017, after more than seven years of development, the Oddity team decided to rebrand it as a completely original game rather than a fan-made sequel. Mother 4 was never officially hit with takedown requests from Nintendo, but the group worried that it might after Nintendo pursued legal action against similar fan projects based on franchises like Mario, Pokémon, and Metroid.

The team recently announced that its project is officially called Oddity. The name is a nod to the game's odd development history, as well as David Bowie's song "Space Oddity," which has a special meaning to the developers. Oddity no longer features any elements that tie it to the Mother series, such as the inclusion of fan-favorite Mr. Saturn, but it still looks like a charming old-school RPG with a lot of heart.

"For most of us, it's still our first



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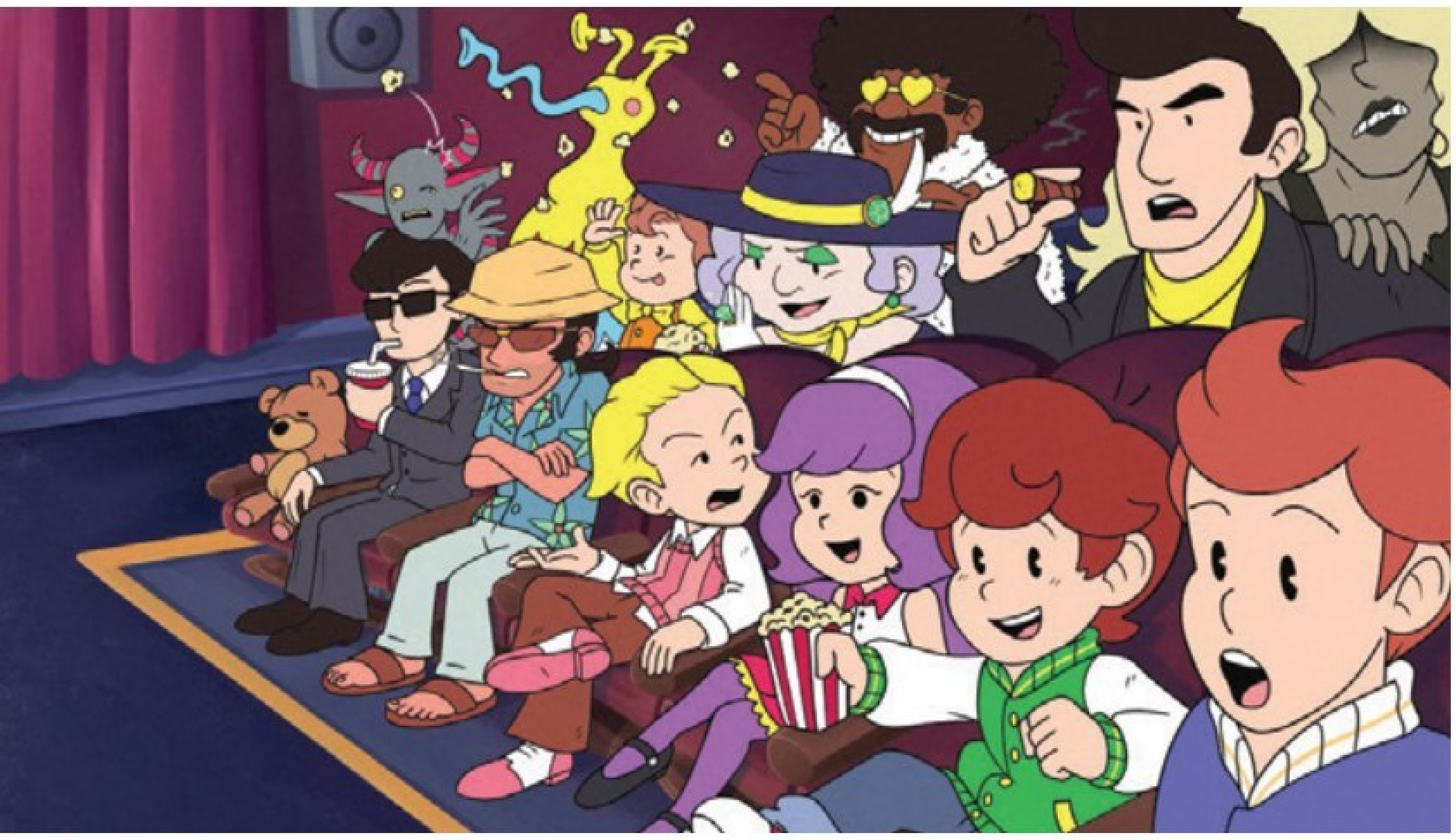


game, and that's challenging in its own right," Pastel says. "We really went into this with no expectations – just to make something. And you don't know what you don't know, after all, so that can be tough. But the biggest challenge so far has been coordination when everyone works remotely."

For a group of fans who have never made a game before, Oddity looks impressive. The project's current iteration still plays much like an old Mother game; players take part in turn-based RPG battles and assemble a crew of psionically fueled heroes on a zany quest around a version of '70s America. However, the Oddity team has added its own spin to the action and is still looking for ways to speed up the turn-based encounters.

Oddity's story follows a regular kid named Travis Fields who embarks on a mission to spread a warning about a group of mysterious objects called Gates. These Gates have an unknown origin, but they are causing animals and people to grow aggressive, they're making machines to go haywire, and they have inspired a cult to summon a horde of demons. To put a stop to this insanity, Travis teams up with a talkative church boy named Floyd, a clairvoyant named Meryl, and a wayward criminal named Leo.

"The process [of designing the narrative] was a long one, but it involved diving into a lot of UFO mythology, old school conspiracy theories, and urban legends, so it was really fun," Pastel says.

Oddity has been in development for over 10 years. During that time, the game has taken several different forms, but one thing has remained consistent over the decade: its developers are big fans of Nintendo's neglected franchise, and they want to make the kind of RPG that will excite fans like themselves. Of course, since the Oddity team is working on the project during their free time, they aren't sure when the game will be ready for release.

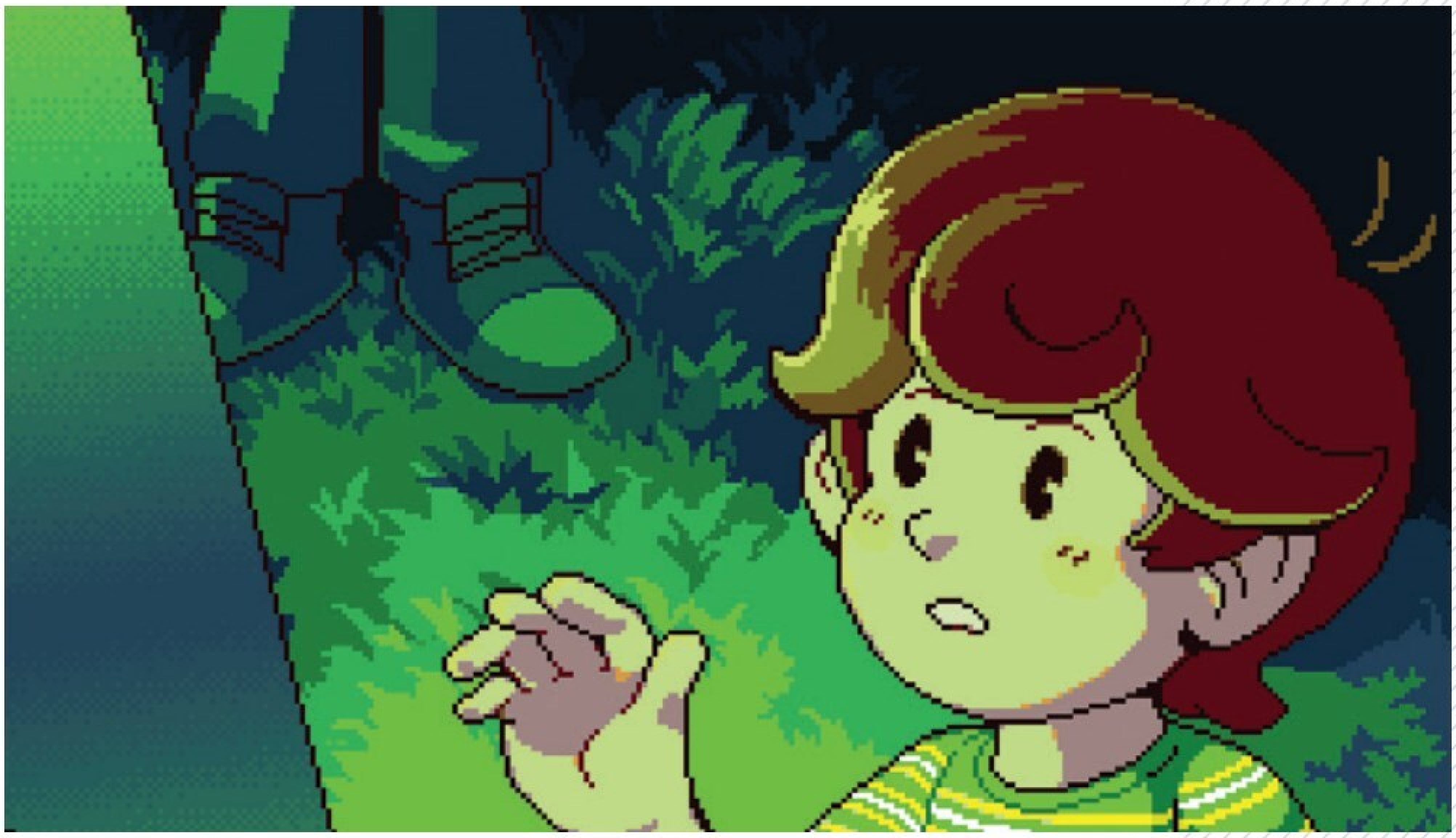
"For most of our development, there was this balancing act of creating something really faithful to the source material and building our own identity," Pastel says. "Eventually we had a very difficult decision to make, and the result is an original project inspired by a lifetime of fandom … It's been a very low-budget project, but the biggest cost has been in what we've passed up in favor of this project. Our lives have essentially been on hold during its creation. But it feels absolutely worth it."

A Quick Rundown Of The Mother Series

Mother (1989) – The original NES game was one of the first RPGs to feature a contemporary setting. The first game in the series didn't initially release in the North America, but Nintendo finally localized Mother as EarthBound Beginnings for the Wii U's Virtual Console in 2015.

Mother 2 (1994) – While some reviewers criticized the sequel for failing to take advantage of the power of the SNES hardware, fans loved the absurd humor and world. This was also the first entry in the series to release outside Japan, but the English title was changed to EarthBound.

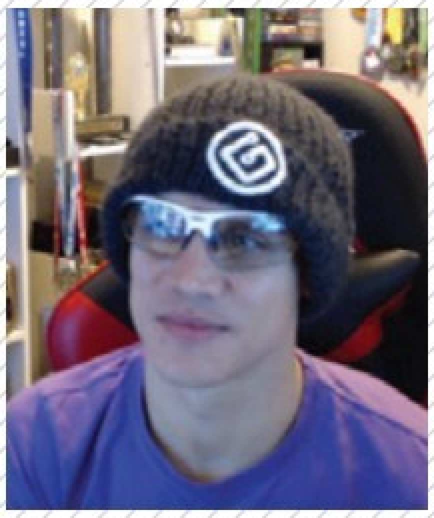
Mother 3 (2006) – Mother 3 was initially in development for the Nintendo 64's 64DD expansion, but the title experienced a troubled development before finally launching on the Game Boy Advance almost a decade after conception. Unfortunately, Nintendo still hasn't localized the third entry for North America, but a number of fan groups have attempted translations.



300 Doses Of Kryptonite

Meet the person who has completed Superman 64 over 300 times

Superman 64 is among the worst video games ever made. Rather than empowering the player with the feeling that they are controlling one of the world's greatest superheroes, it makes them question if their controller is broken. The simple act of making Superman fly forward is unbearably difficult, leading many people to quit playing after just a few minutes. Completing the game seems foolhardy, and yet, one of *Game Informer*'s readers has accomplished this grueling task over 300 times. His name is **Zachary Pligge** and he rightfully hates the game. Why does he inflict this digital pain upon himself? Because of a bet.



Occupation:
Network Administrator & Professional Runner

Location:
Chicago, IL

YouTube:
YouTube.com/ZPligge

Twitter:
@PliggeTheFallen

Twitch:
Twitch.tv/PliggeTheFallen

interview by Andrew Reiner

How did this lifelong bet come to be?
I met this person, David, playing Asheron's Call 2 back when it released [in 2002]. In that meeting, I found out he lived nearby, and like me, ran cross country and track in a competing conference school. The Superman 64 bet came about in the fall of 2004 during our cross country's sophomore year season. I was having a great year running and did not lose to him all season, meaning I always had better times than he did. Even so, he made a bet that he would beat me at conference. I was confident I would win, so I didn't care what the bet was. In the end, he outran me in the final 600 meters of the race.

What exactly was the bet?
He knew I was a fan of Superman. And I complained to him how terrible Superman 64 was over and over again. One of my complaints was that I could never seem to beat it. The bet became if he won the race, I would have to beat Superman 64 at least once a month until I decided to stop playing video games as a whole. If I won, he had to beat Banjo-Kazooie once a month until he decided to quit. He got the better game, but as a fan of Mario 64, he hated it.

The bet sounded like a joke, kind of like you were dreaming up the worst possible gaming situations for each other, but you decided to honor it. Why?
We were pretty competitive, in a fun and goofy way, since I learned we had a similar sense of humor. And yes, this bet initially sounded like a joke, the way many others do. But when we saw each other at the cross-country meet, he brought it up again. It sounded like a way we'd be able to cement our friendship beyond childhood and high school, so we decided to honor this one.

Did he ever say you didn't have to play it anymore? That you more than made good on it?
He never once said I could stop playing. And I never once thought about stopping. David passed in 2009 due to health complications. I continue to honor the bet.

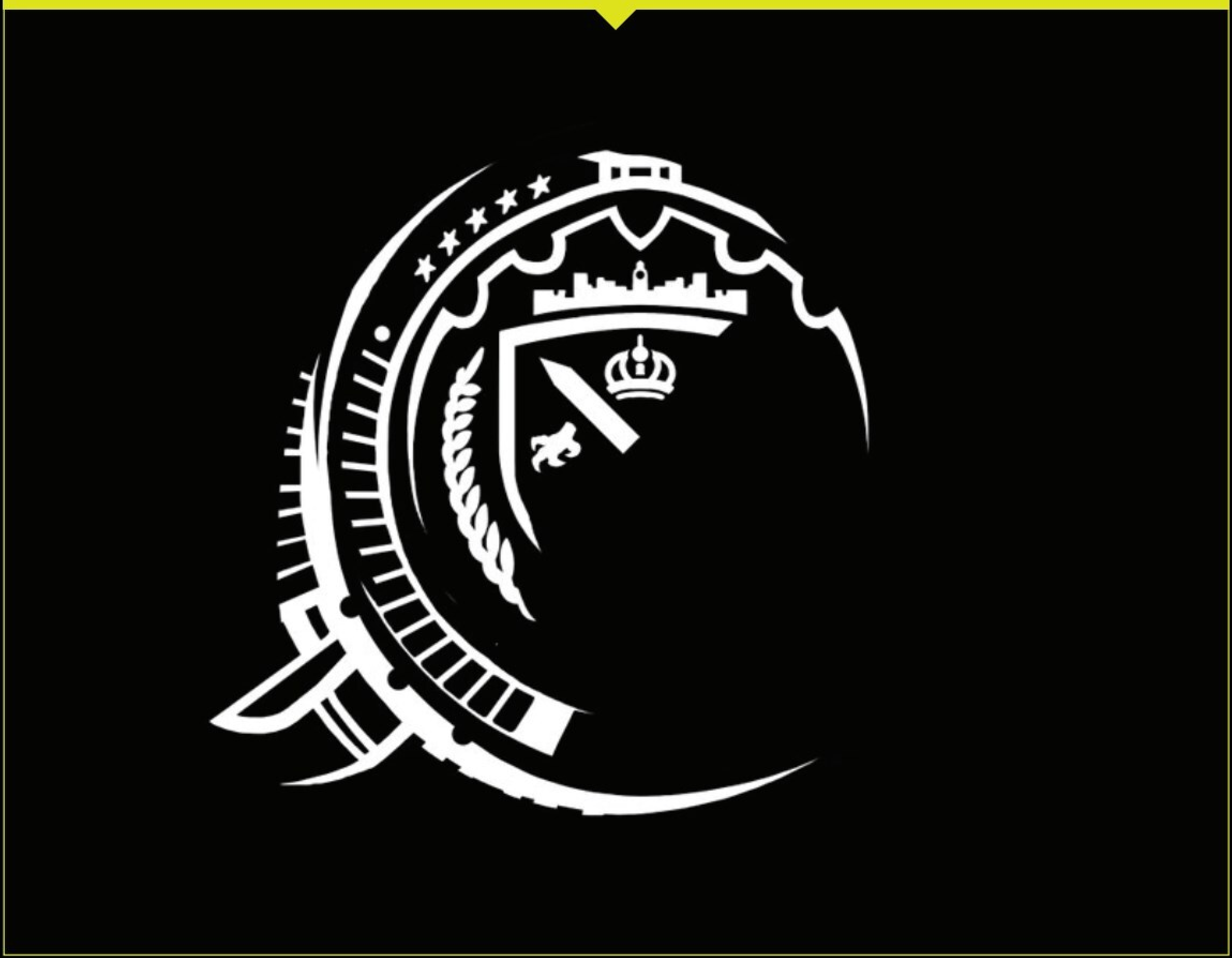
Do you think of him each time you play?
Absolutely. Both in good and bad ways. The good being I get to think about him. The bad because that game sucks so much.

You have now seen the credits roll on Superman 64 over 300 times. Have you missed a month since the bet came to be?
I complete it once a month, sometimes more, because it now has become the game I turn to if I don't know what else to play. I used to have such a hard time beating it. Now my average completion time is a little over three hours, my best being two hours and seven minutes. I have never missed a month.

Someone at Games Done Quick managed to finish Superman 64 in roughly 37 minutes. Are you going to adopt any of their strategies to complete it faster or maybe make a run to have the fastest time yourself?
I definitely have adopted speed-run strategies I've seen over the years to help clear the game efficiently. But I do play the game on the hardest difficulty, Superman Mode, from start to finish. So, I will never get my time down to that level. I have thought about trying to go for the fastest run on Superman Mode, but in the end, I don't think I have enough time to dedicate to Superman 64 and still play other games.

After 300 playthroughs, what are your thoughts on the game now? From bad to worse, or are you having some fun with it?
I still dislike the game and think it's an absolute train wreck. The ring segments will forever haunt my dreams. But a very small part of me has grown to love it for what it is. I'd be lying if I said I did not enjoy playing it every month.

The Good



WB GAMES MONTRÉAL has been teasing a new Batman title through its social media accounts, the latest showing various parts of what looks to be the crest of the Gotham City Police Department. The studio's last major game was Batman: Arkham Origins in 2013. Its new project has not been officially announced at the time of this writing.

The Bad

A rash of game delays have hit, rearranging the spring release schedule. While Final Fantasy VII Remake and Iron Man VR were only delayed slightly later into spring (April 10 and May 15, respectively), **CYBERPUNK 2077** has been pushed to September 17, Marvel's Avengers is now slated for September 4, and Dying Light 2 doesn't even have a new release date yet.

Regarding Cyberpunk 2077 specifically, the delay also affects the game's free multiplayer component, which developer CD Projekt anticipates won't come out until 2021.

The Ugly

Xbox fans were given a mistaken sneak peek at the back of the coming **XBOX SERIES X** console at trade show CES when chip-maker AMD used a fake mock-up taken from a website during its presentation. For what it's worth, the fictitious Series X showed the same ports as the Xbox One X. Nevertheless, as of the time of this writing, Microsoft has not made any official announcements about the Series X's ports.

Quotable

> **"As our content comes out over the next year, two years, all of our games, sort of like PC, will play up and down that family of devices."**

– **Matt Booty**, head of Xbox Game Studios, tells *MCVUK* that the upcoming Xbox Series X initially won't have its own console exclusives.

It's Always Sunny In The Games Industry

Exploring game development through the new sitcom *Mythic Quest: Raven's Banquet*

by Kimberley Wallace

Making games isn't easy. Before the final product reaches store shelves, many decisions and concessions have to be made. However, we rarely get a window into the many different facets of the complex machine that is game development. *Mythic Quest: Raven's Banquet*, a Ubisoft show currently available on Apple TV+, is hoping to do just that while adding a little humor along the way. From the minds behind *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (Rob McElhenney, Charlie Day, and Megan Ganz), the nine-episode live-action show centers on the challenges a group of game developers face while trying to keep their MMORPG on top. To learn more about the creative decisions behind the show, we chatted with the creators and cast, discovering everything from how it came to be to the extensive research that went into representing the games industry.

Dancing With Style

Mythic Quest shows many different sides to the industry, down to the various positions and personalities within. You have the egotistical creative director, the sly marketing lead, and the underappreciated QA testers. The show discusses trends like the rise of streamers and prevalence of microtransactions, but how did the creators go about getting it right? They had access to the right resources.

The idea for the show actually came from Ubisoft's head of television and film and executive producer, Jason Altman, who previously spent 15 years of his career working on games, like the mega-popular Just Dance series. "Working on a development team, I just thought it was an environment filled with big personalities and a lot of stories to tell," Altman says.

Altman envisioned the show as a comedy, but also wanted it to stay true to the industry and discuss its issues. To bring his idea to life, he approached McElhenney, best known for his character Mac on *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, for a meeting. McElhenney, however, needed a little convincing.

"I wasn't necessarily that interested," says executive producer and lead McElhenney. "Mostly because the things that I had seen in the last 20 years in anything in popular culture that were dealing with the [video game] industry and the people that work in it always just felt like it was making fun of the community, and that was something that didn't interest us."

Creating A Fake MMO

During the show, you see footage of Mythic Quest and various characters playing it. This was all created from the ground up to keep things true to life. To achieve this, Ubisoft tapped on Red Storm, a studio in North Carolina that's best known for its work on the Tom Clancy games, to create a high-fantasy, third-person MMORPG complete with spells and swords.

Red Storm rose to the challenge. "We made a fake game with a real development team that looks like a real game," says Ubisoft head of television and film and executive producer Jason Altman. "We actually had practical sandboxes that the cast was able to play while we were shooting," adds Ubisoft director of television development and executive producer Danielle Kreinik. "And so all of the stuff that is specific to our game, Mythic Quest, was custom created by our team." This included using mo-cap to bring to life a digitized version of Rob McElhenney's character, Ian.

McElhenney took the meeting, joking that the worst that could come out of it was a free trip to Montreal. To help sell his vision, Altman had McElhenney learn about all the different roles people have in the studio such as creative directors, artists, programmers, and community managers, and let him interview them about their jobs. "I think that process there really opened his mind to what the show could be," Altman says.

McElhenney quickly saw the potential: "Within 10 minutes of being in there, I realized, 'Wow, this is just an incredible place to set a TV series,' mostly because what they do is so specific, and so large, and so worldwide. And yet, the people that are creating those games are just like anybody else that is working in an office building, really just trying to navigate their work with the dynamics of their peers." He phoned his fellow *Always Sunny* co-star and creative partner Day from the studio that day, saying this was something they had to do.

Capturing The Industry's High And Lows

From the beginning, the goal was to be as authentic as possible, meaning the creators did tons of research, even interviewing developers outside of Ubisoft (sadly, they're not allowed to name names). McElhenney said his team met with everyone from janitors and cafeteria workers to HR and testers to really get a sense of the day-to-day operations at a studio. "I love [that] we had a monetization expert, a tremendous woman," says executive producer Megan Ganz, who in addition to writing on *It's Always Sunny*, also worked on *Community* and *Modern Family*. "She basically was like, 'Yeah, everybody hates me. I'm the one everybody doesn't like.'" Ganz says they asked the woman why she does her job if everyone hates her. Her response was gold: "Because I'm really good at it." It's within these little stories that the writers got their inspiration for characters and storylines.

Episodes tackle everything from working with influencers (meet Pootie Shoe!) to the challenges of implementing anything new in a game (in this case it's intense arguments over a shovel), but it also isn't afraid to explore difficult topics. "One of the great things about working with Ubisoft from the very beginning – I remember saying to them, 'Look, if we're going to do this, we can't pull any punches,'" McElhenney says. "We can't do an episode about crunch and have you step in and say, 'We don't feel comfortable with you guys doing this because of A, B, and C.' Then we went to Apple and said the same thing. We want to make sure that our partners recognize that this is a true issue. And if we pretend like it isn't, then it's going to feel like we're pandering."

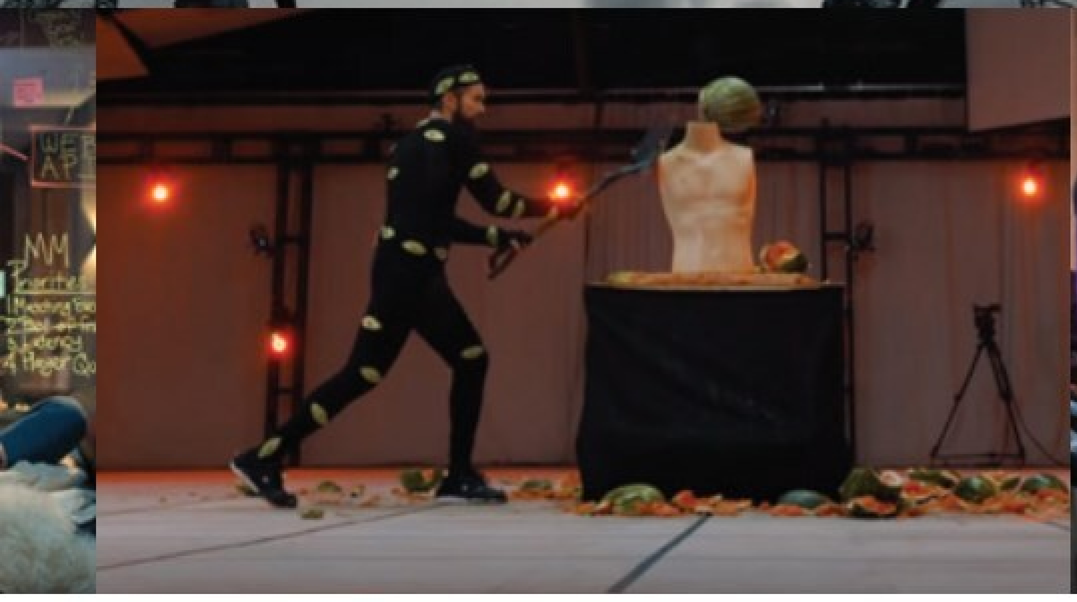
McElhenney said Ubisoft and Apple agreed that if the community is dealing with it, he should be doing it in the show. "We told him that he could talk about any topic he felt was pertinent, just like he does on *Sunny*," says Ubisoft director of television development and executive producer Danielle Kreinik. "It's a funny group of characters, but they're always delving into these darker topics. And I think it's important because the best way that you can talk about these topics are with comedy, and showing what the world is actually like."

Similarly, McElhenney didn't want *Mythic Quest* to be solely focused on Ubisoft. This led to using and referencing games outside of Ubi properties, like Red Dead Redemption II and Kingdom Come: Deliverance. "That was just reaching out reaching out to those individual studios and seeing if we could license some of their material because we wanted to make sure that this didn't feel like a commercial for Ubisoft, and Ubisoft felt just as strongly. This is a show that is supposed to be celebrating the industry at large and not one particular studio."

Big Personalities For Big Conflict

Mythic Quest: Raven's Banquet's first season focuses on a fictional MMORPG [see sidebar], with the developers striving to stay relevant and release new content. "We liked the idea of an MMO because we wanted to feel like we were tracking people who had created an ongoing world," Ganz explains. "The stakes are so much higher with an MMO because you have players that have dedicated years of their lives to your game, and every change you make they react to."

At the heart of the show is the relationship between creative director Ian (McElhenney) and his lead engineer Poppy (played by Australian actress Charlotte Nicdao). The two are constantly at odds due to their different skills and big egos. Ian is creatively minded, while Poppy is technically minded. Ian gets all the glory when



something succeeds in the MMORPG. Poppy brings his creations to life and stays in the background mostly. McElhenney notes that instead of characters being stuck together because of their failures like in *It's Always Sunny*, here it's because of their successes. "Ian is really good at this one thing and Poppy is really, really good at this other thing, and without each other that one thing would flounder, but together they thrive and get to drive each other insane."

The pair are the key players in the studio, but they're also surrounded by interesting personalities played by a stellar cast. For instance, Danny Pudi (*Community*) plays Brad, head of monetization, who only cares about profits and golf. "It was a character I'd never played before: someone who's universally hated," Pudi says. "I thought that was going to be fun – a person who's driven by money and manipulating people, but at the same time, who is surrounded by all these other like, pockets of brilliance."

Ashly Burch (Life is Strange, Horizon Zero Dawn) started as a writer on the show, but then found her way to playing the part of Rachel, an unappreciated QA tester who is secretly in love with a fellow tester. "I was brought on as someone that has a lot of knowledge of this industry, and it was really fun for me because I am a gamer myself," Burch says. "I wanted to make something that felt authentic, that people would watch and say, 'Oh, yeah, that is what that's like.'"

Burch and Pudi are joined by David Hornsby (*It's Always Sunny*) as an executive producer who can't make decisions, F. Murray Abraham (*Scarface*, *Homeland*), Mythic Quest's lead writer who is likely to be found with an alcoholic beverage in hand, Jessie Ennis (*Life of the Party*, *Better Call Saul*) as the overzealous assistant with some deep seated anger, and Imani Hakim, a QA tester-turned-streamer trying to navigate the world of online trolls.

As of February 7, all nine episodes are available on subscription service Apple TV+, and the show has already been renewed for a second season, which the creators have high hopes for. "We've established these characters," Ganz says, "Now we just get to mix them up in fun ways that you haven't seen before. We're doing so with interesting pairings that you didn't necessarily see in the first season."

Burch adds, "It's like little Lego pieces. Fitting together people and seeing how that stuff plays out is so fun when you know who the cast is and you know what kind of show you're making." ◆

That Dark Quiet Death Episode …

If you've watched the first season, there's one episode that's very different and which punches you in the gut called, "A Dark Quiet Death." The whole episode takes place outside the Mythic Quest studio and its employees. It focuses on the relationship between two people who meet discussing games and fall in love. The pair marries, starts their own studio, and creates a game together that becomes an unexpected hit. Similar to Ian and Poppy, they have very different philosophies on how to maintain their success.

"Initially, we were talking about an episode that just focused on the evolution of the way that they market video games over the decades," explains executive producer Megan Ganz. "We started talking about that for a long time. Then we came upon the idea of watching one game and seeing how it was marketed. We started with this idea of like, 'Oh, what if there was this commercial that showed guns in this game where there weren't guns? How would the creators feel about that?'"

The episode represents a real struggle that creators face and the pitfalls of what happens when you lose sight of your initial vision. "It's reconciling sometimes having to give up a certain amount of creative control to be able to do the thing in the first place," says executive producer Rob McElhenney. "But then ultimately, as the corruption seeps in, not having the wherewithal to be able to stop it."

The episode isn't an attack at marketing, but more of a cautionary tale. "Ultimately, it's the job of the creators themselves, the people who are in charge of that particular product, to recognize when something is okay to give up and when it isn't," McElhenney says. "Of course, you have to give at certain points. Of course, you can't always have it your way. You have to compromise, but at what point are you compromising the soul of something that you've created? That's a really difficult line to tow."

LEVELS PLAYED AS A CHILD

by Matt Miller

Drake's Rooftop Run

(Uncharted 3)

In a thrilling platforming sequence, we witness Nathan Drake's early attempts at slipping away from grasping hands and wild gunshots, as he leaps and scuttles across a rooftop urban sprawl. The level is a compelling glimpse into our hero's early life, and reveals his earliest connection to series mainstay, Victor Sullivan. But its most important effect is driving home a central theme of the whole series, and Drake's family motto: "Greatness from small beginnings."

Molly Goes To Bed Without Dinner

(What Remains of Edith Finch)

Early in the game, players have yet to discover the odd (and usually tragic) vignette structure of Edith's family memories. Molly's charming but increasingly creepy chapter sets the tone. After being sent to bed without food, her experiments with ill-advised non-edibles feel real enough, before launching into a surreal body-hopping journey of increasingly ravenous predators whose hunger can never be sated.

The Explosion

(Spider-Man)

Everything changes in a single moment for Miles Morales. He's at an event celebrating his father's heroism when terrorists strike, and the world is thrown into disarray – lending a gravitas to the game's tone that takes it beyond initial expectations. With Peter Parker out of commission, players adopt the role of young Miles as he runs back into danger at great personal risk, hinting at the heroic character he will one day become.

Sherry Birkin's Escape

(Resident Evil 2)

Sherry just can't catch a break. She's already been kidnapped by a loathsome monster of a man who chases her through an old orphanage in the dark, shouting expletives at the scared little girl while she flees for her life. But then Mr. X shows up, and things get really crazy. Stepping into her shoes, we feel even more vulnerable than we usually do in these games, with nothing but our wits to save us.

Lara's First Adventure

(Shadow of the Tomb Raider)

We're used to an ultra-capable Lara Croft surmounting every challenge in her path, but everyone's got to start somewhere. In an intriguing flashback, we witness Lara's adventures in her own backyard, chasing down treasure on playground equipment and confronting imaginary battles as she climbs walls of hanging ivy. It all leads to an all-too-real family disaster that shapes this hero's entire future.

Through The Eyes Of A Little Sister

(BioShock 2)

Big questions get some equally big answers as players take control of a Little Sister, clambering through vents and slipping quietly through the corridors of the underwater dystopia of Rapture. While it's great fun to get a perspective closer to the ground, the real shift in understanding comes through the Little Sister's conditioned illusions, which hide the ruin and downfall of the city behind a veneer of beautiful Art Deco luxury.

The Pint-Sized Slasher

(Fallout 3)

Like so many things in the Fallout universe, Tranquility Lane is a place at odds with its own name. While the 1950's suburbia vibe of the virtual-reality simulation seems peaceful at first glance, it's actually a horrific mental prison with no escape. Within, players can choose to act out the murderous impulses of a sociopathic serial killer, but the whole thing is especially twisted since the killer is a murderous child in a clown mask.

Best Friends

(Life is Strange: Before the Storm)

The standalone bonus episode lives up to its "Farewell" title in powerful and emotionally charged ways. After plenty of storytelling about Max and Chloe's later life, this poignant leap back in time shows us the precious friendship that set the stage for all that follows. In control of a young Max, we see the two girls laughing, playing, and remembering their time together, but we know all too well that a long separation and deep personal trauma is about to strike.

The End Of Connor's Childhood

(Assassin's Creed III)

The Animus offers a chance to understand even the early life of ancestors, as we learn in a leap back into the boyhood of Ratonhnhaké:ton and his life in a quiet Native American village, complete with a playful game of hide-and-seek that establishes the nature of our hero's early life. When one of the central villains turns up, the idyllic scene turns nightmarish, and sets this future assassin on a path toward a new name and Brotherhood.

Order 66

(Star Wars: Jedi Fallen Order)

We've played much of the game knowing that Cal Kestis was the target of trauma and loss, and we finally discover the source of that pain in a memorable flashback. Cal is in training with his beloved master in the moments before Order 66 overrides the clones and turns them against the Jedi. After a frenzied flight and desperate battle, our fledgling hero manages to get away, but the scars of seeing his world turned upside down leave him forever changed.

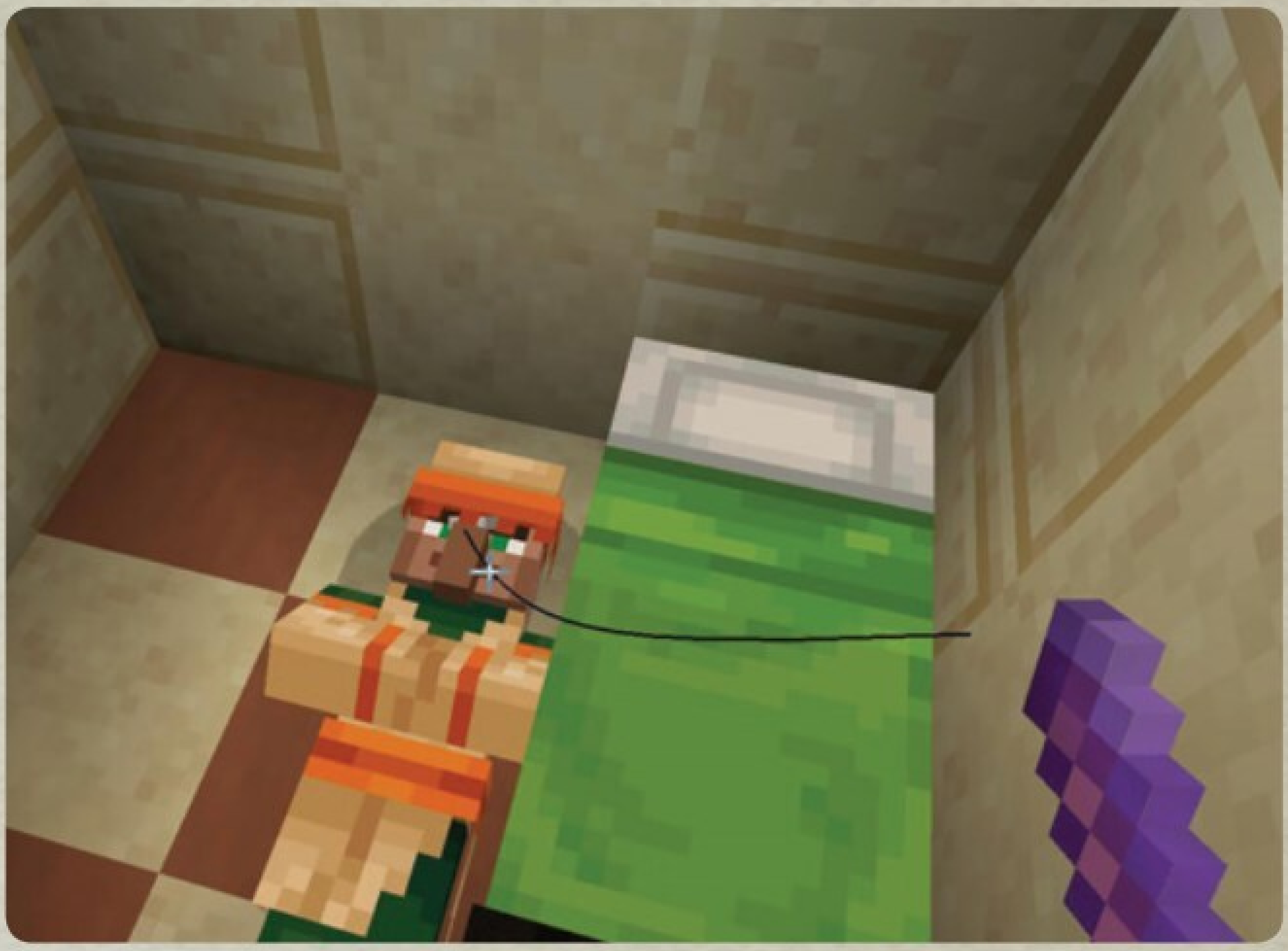
ELECTRIFYING

EMERGENT STORIES FROM ONLINE WORLDS!

by Andrew Reiner

W

When a new online gaming experience hits the market, the development team braces for impact. They want people to play it, the servers to hold up, and players to consume the content the way they intended. On that last note, players like to experiment, and some of their ideas are so outlandish that the developers didn't even consider them. In 1998, an Ultima Online player thought, "What if I attacked Lord British?" Moments like these are rare, occurring in just one match or instance of a world, but thanks to players recording their games, they have become historic events that we can see online. Here are some of the best emergent stories that players have experienced in some of today's biggest games.



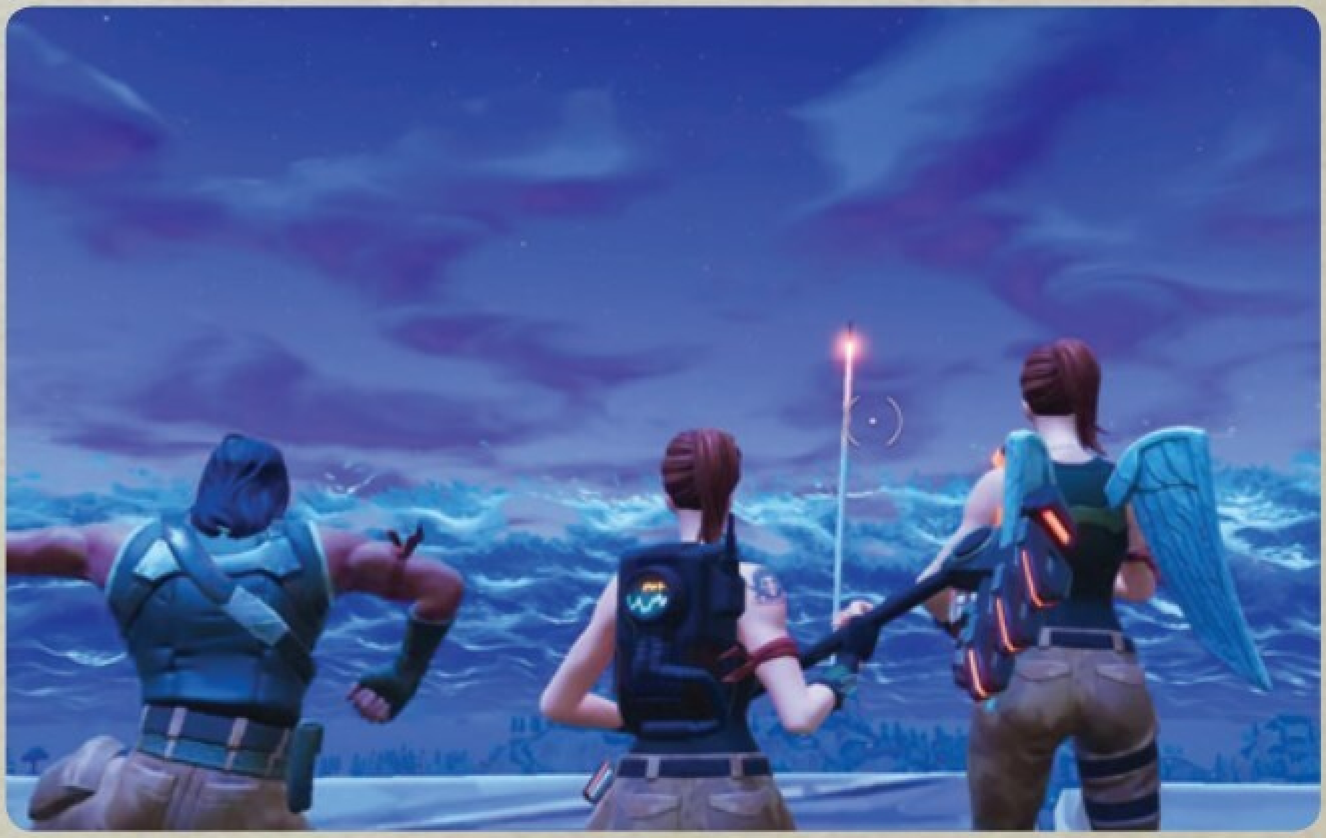
VILLAGER INVASION IN MINECRAFT

Ongoing games receive constant updates, sometimes breaking things you wouldn't expect. When Minecraft introduced the Village & Pillage update, the world's villagers, which were once kind and minded their own business, transformed into annoying home invaders. Even if a player locked their door, they would come home to find a villager sleeping in their bed, or worse, making love. Some of these villagers just happened to be headless, adding a bit of horror to the invasion. The Minecraft community banded together and collectively learned how to cope with the odd villager A.I. Fishing rods were used to lure villagers out of homes. Players also learned that the villagers had trouble going up stairs, so staircases were constructed in front of doors. In the short period before the game was patched again, Minecraft players feared a much bigger threat than Creepers.

FORTNITE'S ROCKET LAUNCH GOES BOOM

From the giant purple cube to a black hole shutting the game down, you never know what to expect from Fortnite. On June 30, 2018, players thought they knew what was happening. Epic announced that a one-time rocket launch would happen, and players lowered their guns to celebrate it together during a match. For the optimal viewing of the rocket, they worked together to build a giant wooden structure high in the sky. Everyone climbed on top of it and waited for the launch to commence.

What they didn't know was a player named Elemental_Ray, who averaged just a .47 kill-to-death ratio, had other plans. As 48 players on the structure danced and partied with one another, Ray destroyed the ramp that kept the structure afloat, sending all of the players into a deadly freefall. In this one spectacular moment, Ray suddenly held the all-time solo kill record for all of Fortnite, but players questioned if it should stand given it happened during a time of supposed peace.



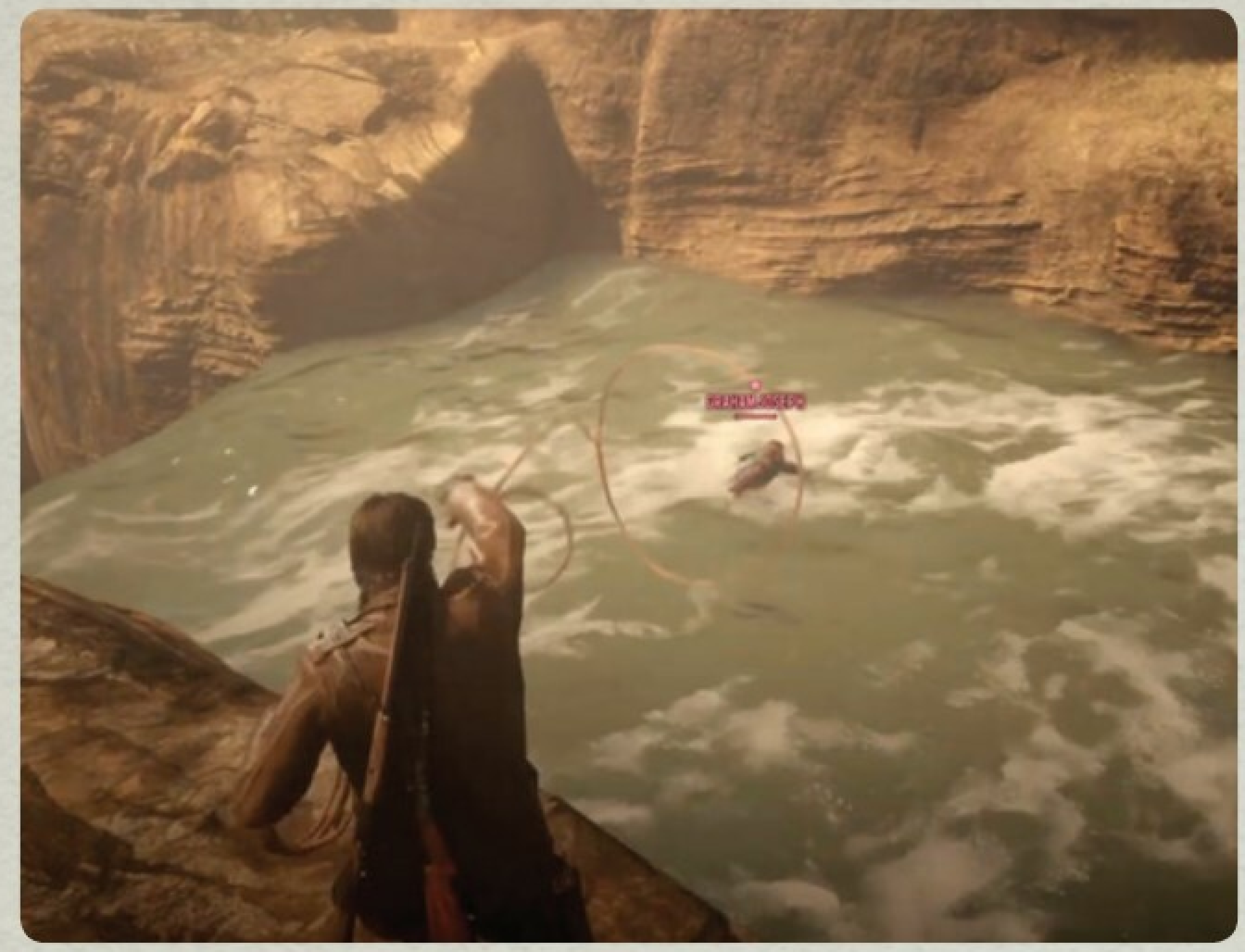
FALLOUT 76'S CLASS WARFARE

The poor rising up to take down the rich is a story as old as time, but it isn't a plot line Bethesda Game Studios wanted to see unfold in Fallout 76. When Bethesda added a premium membership to the game called Fallout 1st, players complained that some of its content – like an expanded storage box and placeable fast-travel point – shouldn't be hidden behind a paywall. Their irritation eventually bubbled into bloodshed in Appalachia's wasteland.

Since players who purchase the Fallout 1st membership light up like a Christmas tree in the world, they became targets for groups of players who want it removed from the game. The peasants, as many of these aggressors called themselves, rose up to take down the rich. That humorous analogy led to the formation of a group called the Apocalyptic Aristocracy, which is home to roughly 1,000 Fallout 1st members. The description for their group includes a comment about peasants: "A peasant isn't simply defined by having $12 less a month, but by an attitude of entitlement to 10 years of content for the $60 they originally paid. A peasant doesn't play Fallout 76, but is in 76 groups to troll and harass people who do. A peasant expects and demands, divides and derails. They insult and attack those who subscribe, or those who play with subscribers. We aren't these things."

A LIFE SAVED IN RED DEAD ONLINE

Quick thinking and even quicker reflexes led to Reddit user RocketSnailz saving a Red Dead Online player's (virtual) life. RocketSnailz befriended a player named Graham Joseph across a river. After a friendly wave, Graham tried crossing the river on his horse, but the current was too strong, and he quickly found himself heading toward a waterfall. RocketSnailz ran along the shore, pulled out his lasso, and with perfect aim, wrapped it around Graham at the last possible second. Graham plunged over the falls, but RocketSnailz had him wrapped up, and was able to pull him up to a safe spot. They again waved to one another and a new friendship was born. This looked like a perfectly timed sequence from a thrilling motion picture, but it was just an emergent moment in a game born from a player showing kindness.

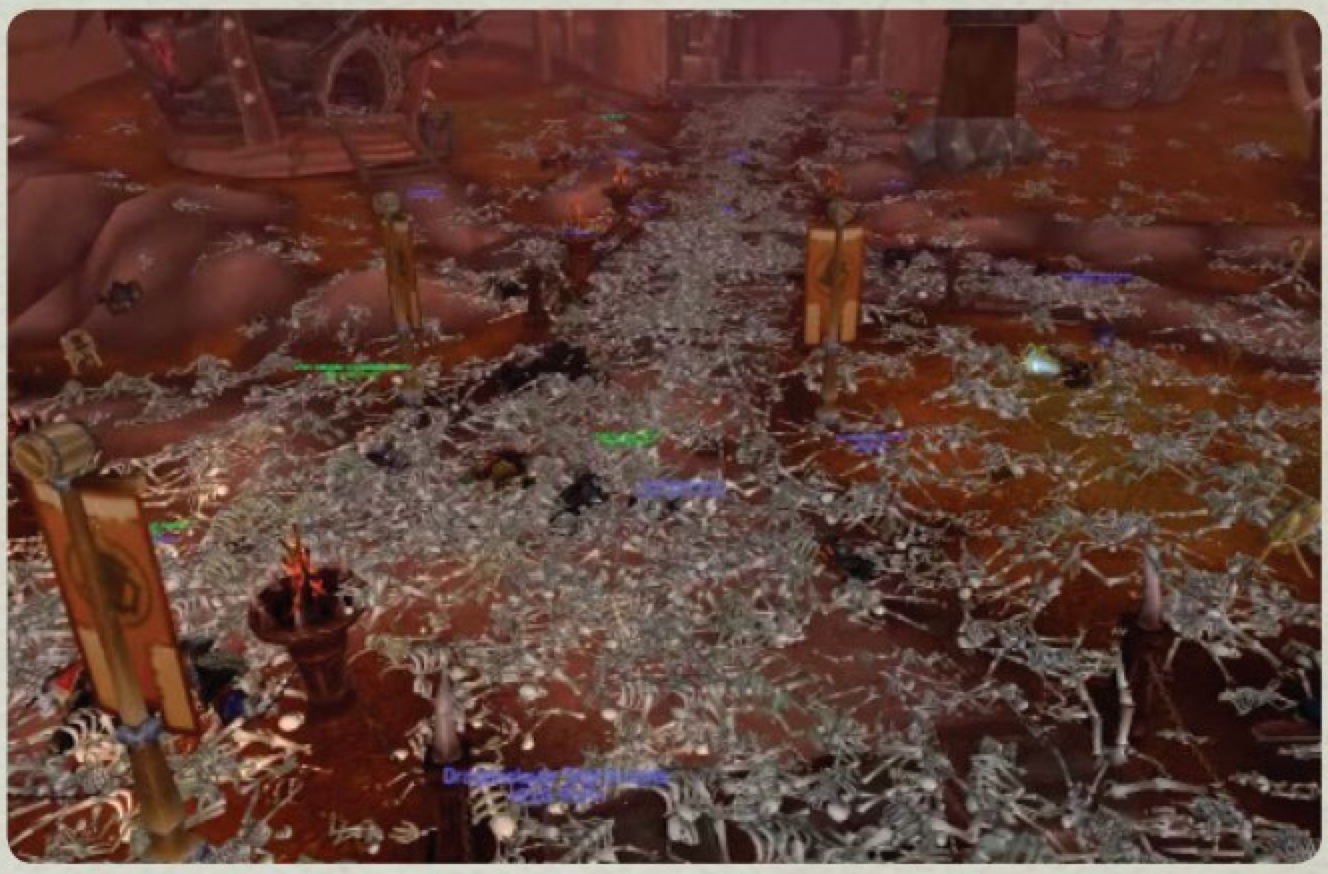


OVER 5,000 EVE ONLINE PLAYERS UNITE TO DESTROY A SPACE STATION

Eve Online has had so many great stories that they've been collected in books. One of this MMO's greatest tales happened on December 4, 2016, when over 5,700 players gathered for a seven-hour battle that concluded with the destruction of a Keepstar Citadel, Eve's equivalent of the Death Star. Pilots from all across the cosmos contributed, which was the first time a Keepstar was taken out, and also set a then all-time record for number of players in one system. The high player density led to the game chugging, but didn't hold it back from delivering the awe-inspiring spectacle of a screen filled with warships at war. Over 2,000 ships were lost in the battle, which added up to over 270 billion ISK (Eve's currency).

THE BLACK WIDOW STALKS DAYZ

Voice chat can become a powerful weapon if a player uses it to manipulate the will of others. A player in DayZ named "Black Widow" used voice chat like a siren's call. In distressed tones she would cry for help, and if someone responded, she would tell them that she was frightened, trapped in a house, and needed their help. She would lure players into a home and then kill them. As she did this, she alerted them that she was filming the brutal act. Black Widow caught players off guard and legitimately disturbed many of them, who took to forums to share stories. She became a legend and even rattled the cages of members of the development team, who never expected scenarios like this to unfold in their game.



PLAGUE HITS WORLD OF WARCRAFT

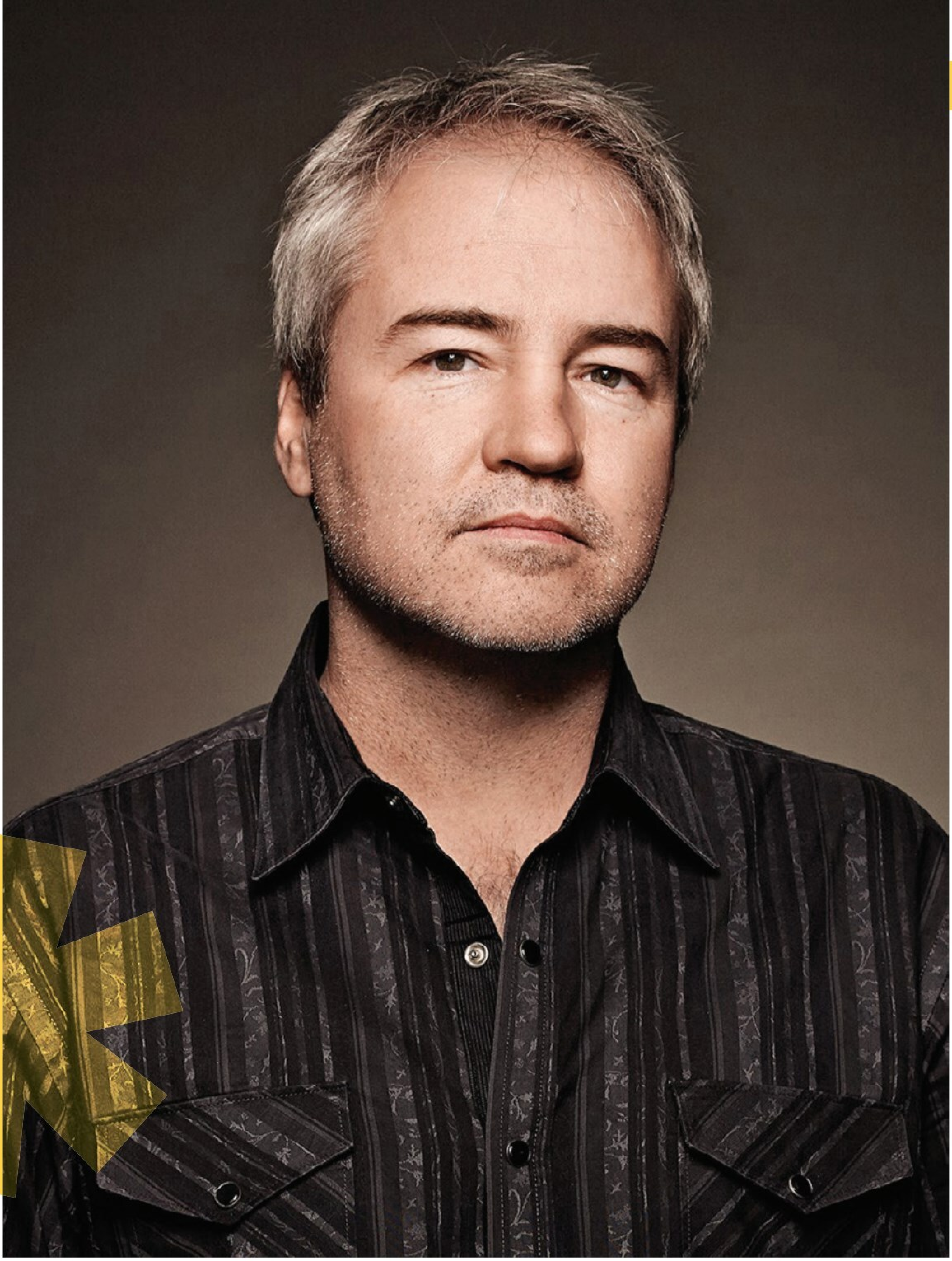
Hakkar the Soulflayer, World of Warcraft's blood god, feasted upon players in September 2005 when Blizzard introduced the game's first 20-player raid Dungeon, Zul'Gurub. When raid groups battled Hakkar, a player could be hit with a debuff, Corrupted Blood, that would drain their life. If they were standing next to another player, the disease was passed to them. Having your life drain away obviously made for a tough fight, but what Blizzard and players didn't anticipate was that the disease could be passed on to pets that, when unsummoned, carried it out of the dungeon. If a low-level player got it, they died almost instantly. Players stayed away from Orgrimmar and Stormwind – the Horde and Alliance capital cities, respectively – out of fear of contracting the disease, meaning they had to find ways to play without immediate access to the banks, inns, or auction houses. This was a major problem for players until Blizzard patched in a disease-killing fix. The incident was even used as an example for real-world research on epidemics.

THOUSANDS TUNE IN TO GRAND THEFT AUTO ONLINE CONCERT

Players take Grand Theft Auto Online role-playing seriously and have turned their in-game personas, whether gangsters or shopkeeps, into streaming careers. On April 10, 2019, a player named MikeTheBard threw one hell of a concert, viewed by thousands of people online, and also by a full house of players in one of the game's bars. Mike belted out song after song, and even pulled out a guitar to play a solo in Ozzy Osbourne's "Mama, I'm Coming Home." This concert became the talk of the game and even attracted the attention of other popular Grand Theft Auto streamers, who stopped everything to watch. Even if they didn't, they were able to listen to Mike's performance through an in-game radio station that was broadcasting it.

Mike didn't break character for most of his performance. He embraced his role of Hubcap Jones, giving him a fully developed history of being an old rockstar. As he belted out songs from Foo Fighters and other bands, the dance floor came to life and even erupted in a violent mosh pit with people banging into one another.

interview



Spreading Success

Respawn Entertainment is a hit-making studio. Since opening in 2010, Respawn has developed two excellent Titanfall games, and last year's enormously successful titles Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order and Apex Legends. Electronic Arts clearly likes what is happening at Respawn, because it has asked Respawn co-founder Vince Zampella to lead another studio. While maintaining his duties at the Chatsworth, Calif.-based Respawn, Zampella is also overseeing game production at DICE LA in Playa Vista, Calif. (which is roughly 30 miles away). We talked to Zampella about straddling two studios and Respawn's huge 2019.

interview by Andrew Reiner

Let's start with Respawn Entertainment's year, which consisted of the releases of both Apex Legends and Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order. From an outsider's perspective, it seemed like the perfect year for a game studio with two smash hits. What are some of the lessons or takeaways that you had as someone on the inside?
On the positives, it's putting out two giant games like that in one year and doing something new. Building something from scratch to do a new type of game that the studio typically doesn't do is huge. That's what we set out to do: prove that we can do something different and unique. It was super important for me to get that right. The fact that Star Wars landed as well as it did is just … whew … thank God. For Apex and areas to grow, we're still learning and thinking every day. As long as the game is successful, we'll be looking at how we can keep players engaged and what we can do new. And it's not just skins. That stuff needs to be there, but we're also thinking about modes and new things for players to engage in.

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order also marks a new moment for the studio working with a well-known intellectual property. How was it working with Lucasfilm? Do you feel like there were growing pains? Did the relationship grow as the project progressed?
I have to say "yes." I think I'm contractually obligated. [laughs] There were times where it was challenging and times where it was helpful. [Lucasfilm] would come in and help us solve problems. It's a bit of both. Ultimately, I think the relationship ended up being fantastic and Stig [Asmussen, Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order's director] has a really great relationship with the game-design team there, and works in concert well with them. We got a lot of access to the things we needed. It ended up being a really great relationship, and hopefully they say the same thing.

Are you pleased with the feedback you are getting from the gaming community? Star Wars is a touchy subject these days. It needs to be handled just right.
Yeah. How could we not be? It's mostly positive. Fans like it. That's what's really important. Is it perfect? No, of course not, but when you look at a new team building a new game, this is an amazing experience that we put together.

Is that team cranking away on a new Star Wars game? Perhaps a sequel?
They are working.

And that's not on DLC, correct?
I don't know what I'm allowed to say. This is the point in the interview where we both get in trouble.

I was shocked to hear that you got a new gig at Electronic Arts. You don't often see the head of a studio that they helped co-found adopt another studio. How did this come to be?
It just made sense. They are local. It used to fall under David Rutter, who is managing Europe, but because he was so attached to DICE Stockholm, it kind of made sense. We're looking at taking the studio that has done some amazing support content – their post-launch content for Battlefield has been fantastic – and saying, "Okay, make a full game. You're not a support studio any more." They're coming into their own. It doesn't make sense for them to be attached to Europe.

You say DICE LA is making its own game now. Are you bringing some of your philosophies and culture from Respawn over to DICE?
We kind of looked at what they were working on, and reformed how they were thinking about it, so their idea is being pushed through now. I don't, however, want to make them adopt a culture. They've done some amazing work already, so it's more about taking what they are and adopting that to realize they are going to be a full team and figuring out their full potential in their culture.

There obviously has to be some excitement there right now. How far along are they on this unannounced project? When can we expect to see something?
It's still early. It's so early that I couldn't even give you an idea of a date.

Are you still growing the team?
We are still looking for some key hires, so we're not fully open yet, but there are definitely some people we are looking to bring in.

Is it a triple-A studio?
What does triple-A mean to you? To most people it means a certain amount of quality and certain amount of content. It has to be this specific size. I don't think we want to hold ourselves to that. If the idea works, it works. Take something like Apex Legends, for example. Is that triple-A? It doesn't have single-player, so maybe it skirts the line there. People are consuming content in different ways now. We're looking at what can we do to deliver something that is new and exciting. We're not saying it has to be a boxed product. Maybe it will be, but it doesn't have to.

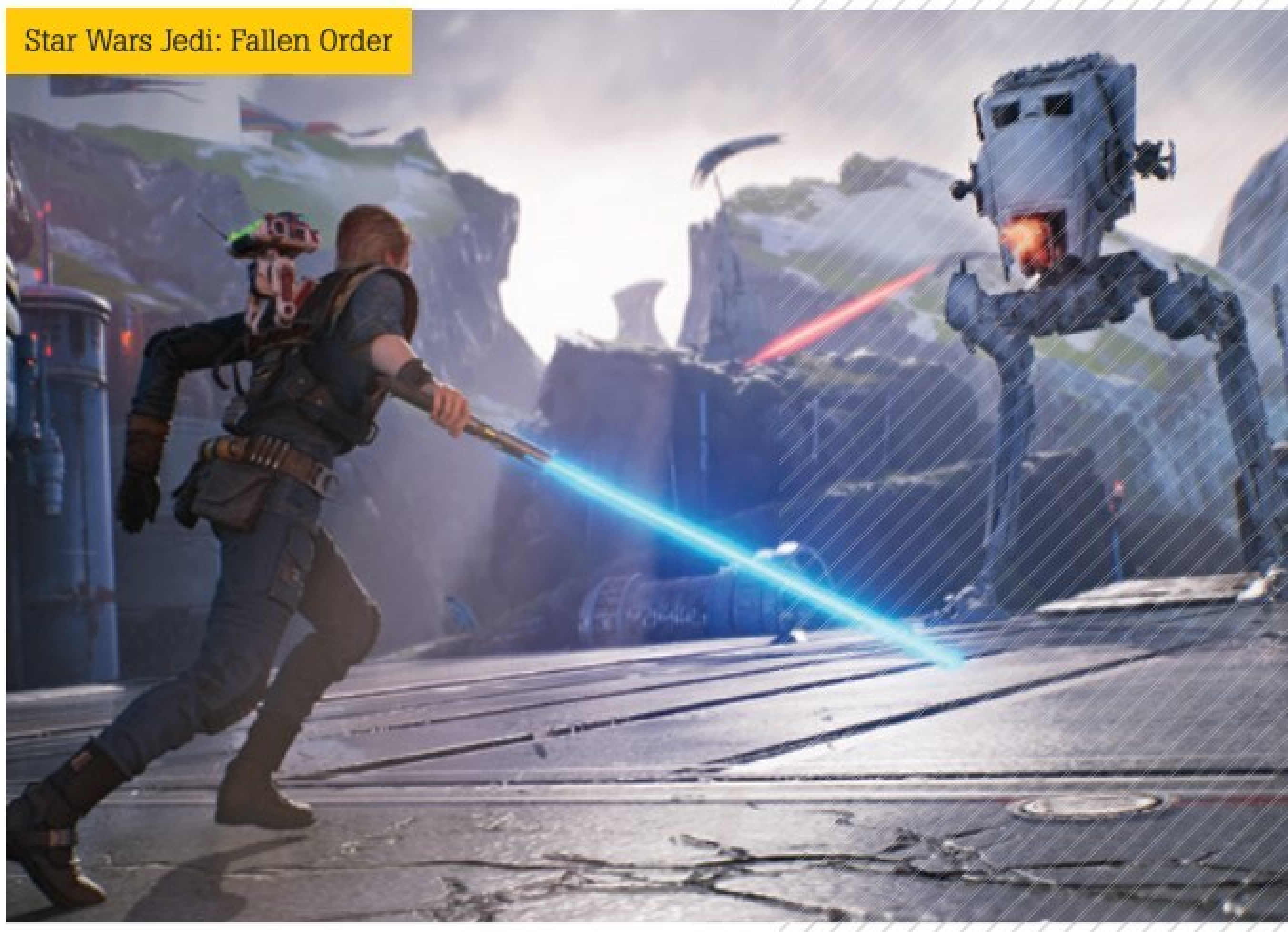
What role do you provide to both studios now?
You know, I'm hopefully a great mentor who can help them step up and realize their potential. There are some people who have been in games and have done great things for a long time and now have the chance – and have earned the chance – to be on their own. My job is to guide them within the studio, within EA, and the video game industry, and help them step into the next path of their careers.

What can we expect next from Respawn?
Apex Legends is still growing and changing. We're looking at new ways that we can deliver things. You see the Grand Soirée happening now with the different game modes, and that's kind of something new. We're trying unique things and seeing what sticks and doesn't. We'll continue the seasonal approach, but make the seasons bigger and get more content out to players – the stuff that they want.

Medal of Honor: Above and Beyond, the Oculus VR game, will ship this year. We haven't announced a timeframe yet, but it will be this year. That's super exciting for me. Getting to reboot Medal of Honor is great. We still have a lot of work to do on it, but there's a lot of great content already. With VR, it's a different kind of finesse. It's a different feel and vibe and it's a matter of getting that right, especially the motion. We'll be tweaking that until the day we go gold.

I have to ask you this each time I talk to you: Titanfall. When are we getting a sequel?
There is nothing I can say about Titanfall other than it's near and dear to my heart. ◆

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order



Hot On The Horizon

The best gear from CES 2020

by Ben Reeves

1 Alienware Concept UFO

The Switch has been such a hit for Nintendo that it was only a matter of time before other companies explored similar handheld gaming concepts. This year at CES, Alienware and Razer both showed off Switch-like mobile controllers. We're most intrigued by Alienware's Concept UFO, which was designed to connect to a small Windows-based tablet capable of running a wide variety of PC games. Alienware didn't detail specs, but the company's mock-up ran games like F1 2019 and World War Z at the show. Like the Switch, the Concept UFO has a kickstand, and its removable side controllers join together to form a standalone controller. This sleek handheld is just a prototype, but Alienware plans to explore a possible commercial release.

dell.com

2 Arcade1up Pinball Lineup

We've championed Arcade1up's line of squat arcade cabinets for a long time. At CES, the company announced that this year's lineup includes cabinets based on NBA Jam and Burger Time. However, we're also excited about Arcade1up's partnership with Bally/Williams and Zen Studios to enter the pinball category. Arcade1up hasn't detailed that lineup, but it plans to release several 3/4 scale machines based on a variety of "big names in the pinball space," which includes hot properties like Marvel and Star Wars.

arcade1up.com

3 Razer Eracing Simulator

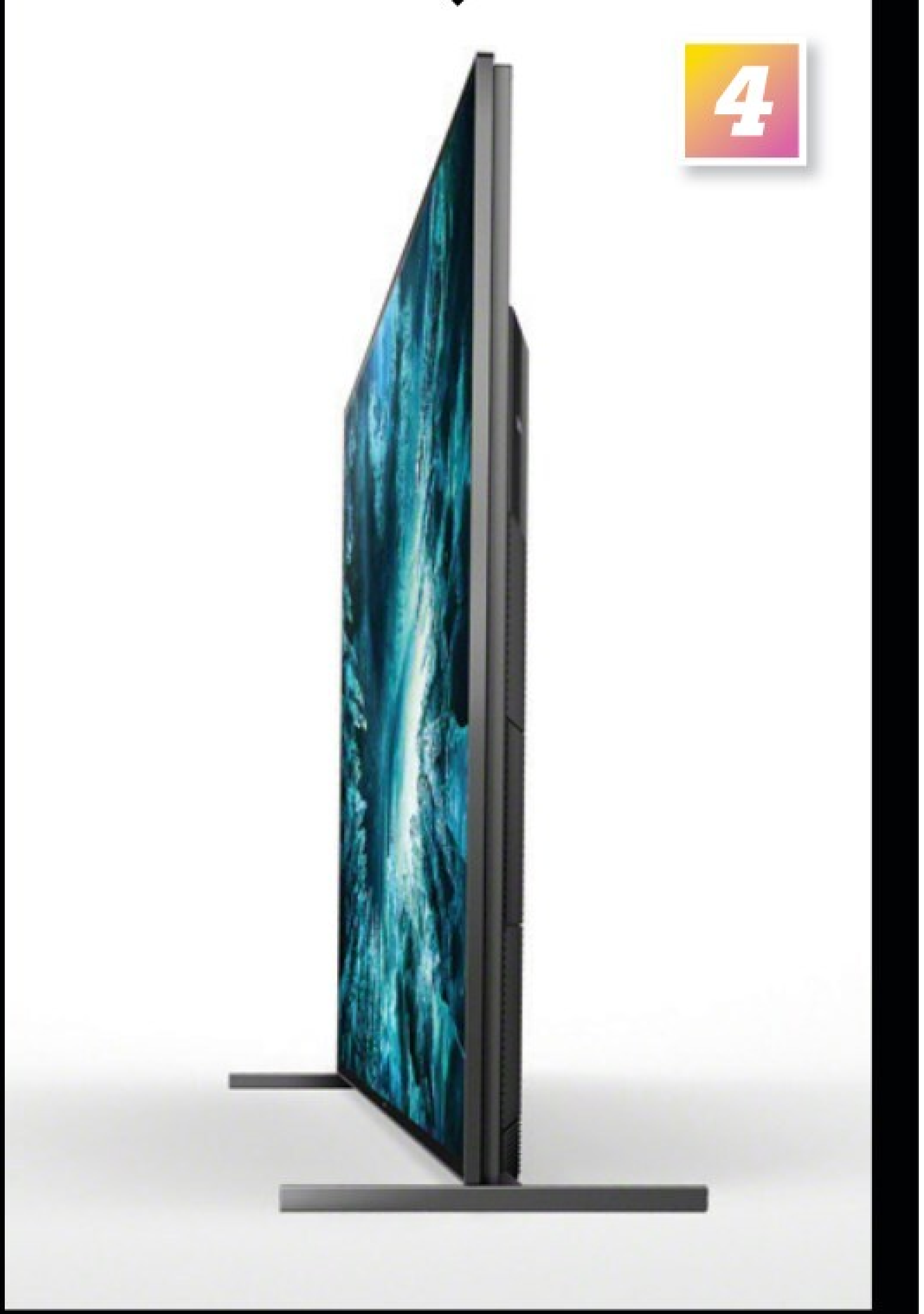
Razer teamed up with some of the leading sim racers to create a concept cockpit that delivers a racing experience second only to the real thing. The Eracing Simulator features a hydraulic racing platform, full manual controls, and an anodized aluminum/carbon fiber steering wheel. Visuals are projected onto a 128-inch custom black projection surface to create an immersive 202-degree field-of-view. Razer's racing harness even simulates G-forces by applying pressure to a user's body while accelerating or taking tight corners. It seems that Razer wants to offer none of the dangers of actual racing, and all of the terror.

razer.com

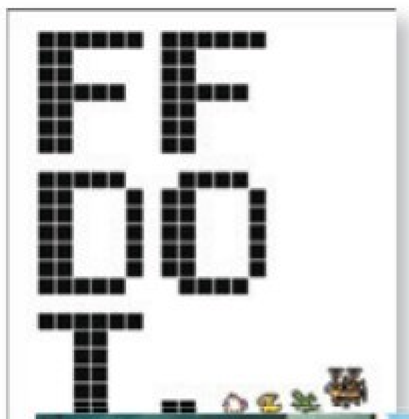
4 Sony 85-inch Z8H 8K LED

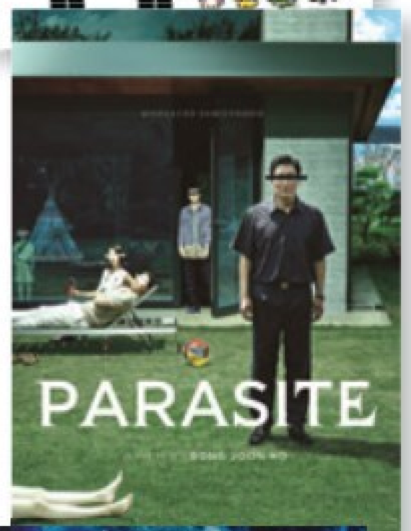
CES is often the best place for television manufacturers to showcase their new displays, and this year was no exception. While Samsung announced a television that could rotate between a horizontal and vertical orientation, LG prepared to roll out sets that roll themselves up when not in use. However, we're most excited to get our eyes on Sony's Z8H. Not only does this sleek set offer a brilliant 8K display, it also features Sony Ambient Optimization technology, a sound system that allows the television to automatically optimize its audio to fit whichever room it's located.

sony.com



Media Shelf





SHOVEL KNIGHT
PRESCRIPTION for SLEEP

FF DOT: THE PIXEL ART OF FINAL FANTASY

The Final Fantasy series is renowned for its gorgeous concept art, but distilling a character's essence into a tiny collection of pixels is sometimes more impressive. This book celebrates that art, complete with several detailed sprite sheets showcasing Final Fantasy's beloved characters, maps, and monsters.

$43.99
store.na.square-enix-games.com

PARASITE

From the visionary director of *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* comes this comedy/thriller about a poor family who schemes their way into the employment of a wealthy household and the destruction they leave in their wake.

$22.99
parasite-movie.com

PRESCRIPTION FOR SLEEP: SHOVEL KNIGHT REMASTERED SOUNDTRACK

Jake Kaufman's original soundtrack for Shovel Knight got the blood pumping. Scarlet Moon Records has brilliantly remixed that entire soundtrack, forming a jazzy collection of lullabies to help you relax, so you can keep shoveling monsters in dreamland.

$12.00
scarletmoon.com

MIXING AND MATCHING WITH THE FUNKOVERSE STRATEGY GAME

Mash your favorite characters together in this clever twist on tactical tabletop showdowns

by Matt Miller

Who would win in a fight between Rick & Morty and the Golden Girls? How might Batman and his gadgets confront a wand-wielding Harry Potter? If the very concept of those match-ups has you laughing, you've begun to grasp why the new Funkoverse board game seems to hit so many of the right marks. Funko Pops have been a dominating force in the collectible market for some years now; a big part of the joy is finding characters from disparate fictions, and seeing them displayed in a shared (and usually adorable) visual style. Funkoverse extends that same conceit into the tabletop gaming world, with a smartly built tactical skirmish game that's incredibly easy to pick up and play, but carries enough unique character powers and customization to bring it out onto the table again and again.

Pick up any of the Funkoverse packs to start your collection, with characters drawn from varied properties like Batman and Harry Potter, or upcoming releases like Jurassic Park and Aggretsuko. The whole idea is that any given game pack can be played by itself, or combined with others as you grow your collection. Whether you snag one of the two- or four-character packs, you bring home attractive figures that can as easily sit on your shelf as display pieces as stay hidden away in the game box. The Funkoverse characters are significantly smaller than traditional Funko Pops, and each has a peghole for holding game items. But they all feature attractive sculpts and, like their bigger cousins, manage to capture important character traits through familiar, minimalist toy design.

The rules for gameplay carry over from one game to the next without much in the way of new ideas to integrate. In general, you're choosing one of the double-sided boards included with each pack, and setting up a squad of characters to do battle. In a basic variant, you're just seeking to knock out your opponents (which is a great gateway playstyle, for adults and kids alike), but the more rewarding options are included scenarios that offer variants on capture-the-flag, territory control, and others. Games move fast, with playtime well under an hour. With combat and challenges played out through throws of the dice, there's an element of randomness that could potentially frustrate some players. But given the straightforward tenor of the overall game, if that's where your head's at, this might be the wrong pick for you in the first place.

The variation and replay value arise through the different character powers and the items they introduce, and the way the designers managed to capture the flavor of such varied settings and have them play nicely with each other. Whether Batman whips out the Batarang for ranged attacks, or Morty loses his cool with his Violent Outburst action, it's entertaining to imagine the way each scene plays out, echoing familiar moments from the TV shows and movies.

One of the smartest mechanics at play is the use of a cooldown track for those abilities. Every power demands the use of a specific token that corresponds to its flavor, from finesse and agility-style actions to those that require great strength, and the token then moves onto a cooldown track, and can't be used again until enough turns have passed. Potent leadership abilities like Rick's "Get Schwifty" or Batgirl's acrobatic Flying Tackle can be game changers, but must be reserved for important moments, as you risk taking essential tokens out of play for a time. Picking teams that can maximize their shared token pool is often key to success.

With its simple scenarios and light tactical throwdowns, Funkoverse Strategy Game isn't going to replace any veteran gamer's sprawling miniature army or heavyweight fantasy wargame. But that's clearly not the point. Instead, Funkoverse ably translates the simplicity and collectible quality of the Funko universe into an accessible ruleset that can easily expand over time. Here is a game that welcomes younger and inexperienced players into the fun of tactical movement and engagement, without denying more experienced players the chance to tweak and shape the gameplay, and the whole thing is backed up through the inclusion of some of the most recognizable pop-culture figures imaginable. ◆

Visit gameinformer.com/topofthetable to discover additional great board, card, and role-playing games

ADDING TO THE COLLECTION

by Andrew Reiner

1

CYBERPUNK 2077'S JOHNNY SILVERHAND & V ACTION FIGURES

From Halo to Gears of War, McFarlane Toys has long been making action figures based on video games. Now the collectible manufacturer is bringing us three fantastic figures just in time for Cyberpunk 2077's launch. Take your pick from two different Johnny Silverhand models: one featuring 20 points of articulation at seven inches in height, and another in a rockstar pose at 12 inches with no articulation. The other figure is of V, the game's customizable protagonist, in his default pose. He is also seven inches in height.

$29.99 (7 inch), $49.99 (12 inch) | mcfarlane.com

2

SPIDER-MAN STATUES

We're still waiting to hear if Insomniac Games is working on a new Spider-Man game, but we can forever remember the developer's first foray with this iconic character thanks to two awesome statues based on the game by Cortes Studios. The Advanced Suit Spider-Man PVC diorama statue stands nine inches in height, and the Spider-Punk is the same scale, yet is just seven inches tall due to the crouched pose.

$49.99 | gamestop.com

3

THE MANDALORIAN ON BLURRG FUNKO POP

Everyone keeps talking about how adorable Baby Yoda is, but let's not forget about our first crush from The Mandalorian: the blurrg. Watching Mando bond with this hostile beast and turn it into his mount was a moment, and you can now remember it forever with a Funko Pop on your shelf.

$24.99 | funko.com

4

KINGDOM HEARTS III'S XION BRING ARTS FIGURE

Step aside, Sora, it's Xion's time to shine as an action figure. The popular keyblade-wielding character from Kingdom Hearts will soon be turned into a Bring Arts figure, complete with interchangeable heads (featuring Xion with and without her hood). She holds the Replica Kingdom Key.

$79.99 | square-enix-games.com

5

DOOM ETERNAL'S DOOM SLAYER ACTION FIGURE

McFarlane Toys is releasing a heavily armed action figure of the Doom slayer, who stands seven inches in height and is decked out with a super shotgun and a retractable arm blade.

$24.99 | mcfarlane.com

HARDWARE REVIEW

DUALSHOCK 4
BACK BUTTON ATTACHMENT

by Brian Shea

Usually reserved for high-end, premium gamepads like the Xbox One Elite or controllers from third parties like Scuf, paddles or back buttons allow you to access commands of your choosing without taking your thumbs off the analog sticks. While expensive solutions exist to achieve this on PS4, Sony provides a much more affordable option through the DualShock 4 Back Button Attachment.

This new first-party accessory connects to the bottom of your existing PlayStation 4 controller and contours near seamlessly along the curves of the controller. Due to the unique shape of the device, it can be tricky to achieve the correct angle to attach the back buttons to the DualShock 4, but unless you plan on swapping between multiple controllers, once it's attached, you have no reason to remove it. Once connected, it adds a small amount of bulk and weight, but it's not disruptive – I actually like the additional heft.

Despite the additional size, your fingers slide naturally onto the two buttons along the rear of the DualShock 4 controller, giving you easy access using your middle or ring fingers, depending on your grip. Pressing the new buttons is as easy as gently squeezing the controller. While this makes it easy to press the buttons, during a few white-knuckled in-game moments, I inadvertently tightened my grip on the controller, setting off one or both buttons.

Sandwiched between the two back buttons is a pressable OLED screen. This screen displays the current configuration of the back buttons, giving you a refresher of what each one is currently programmed to do. By double pressing the screen, you can swap between three completely customizable profiles. A long press of the OLED screen enters edit mode, where you can easily select the commands you want for each button across all three profiles.

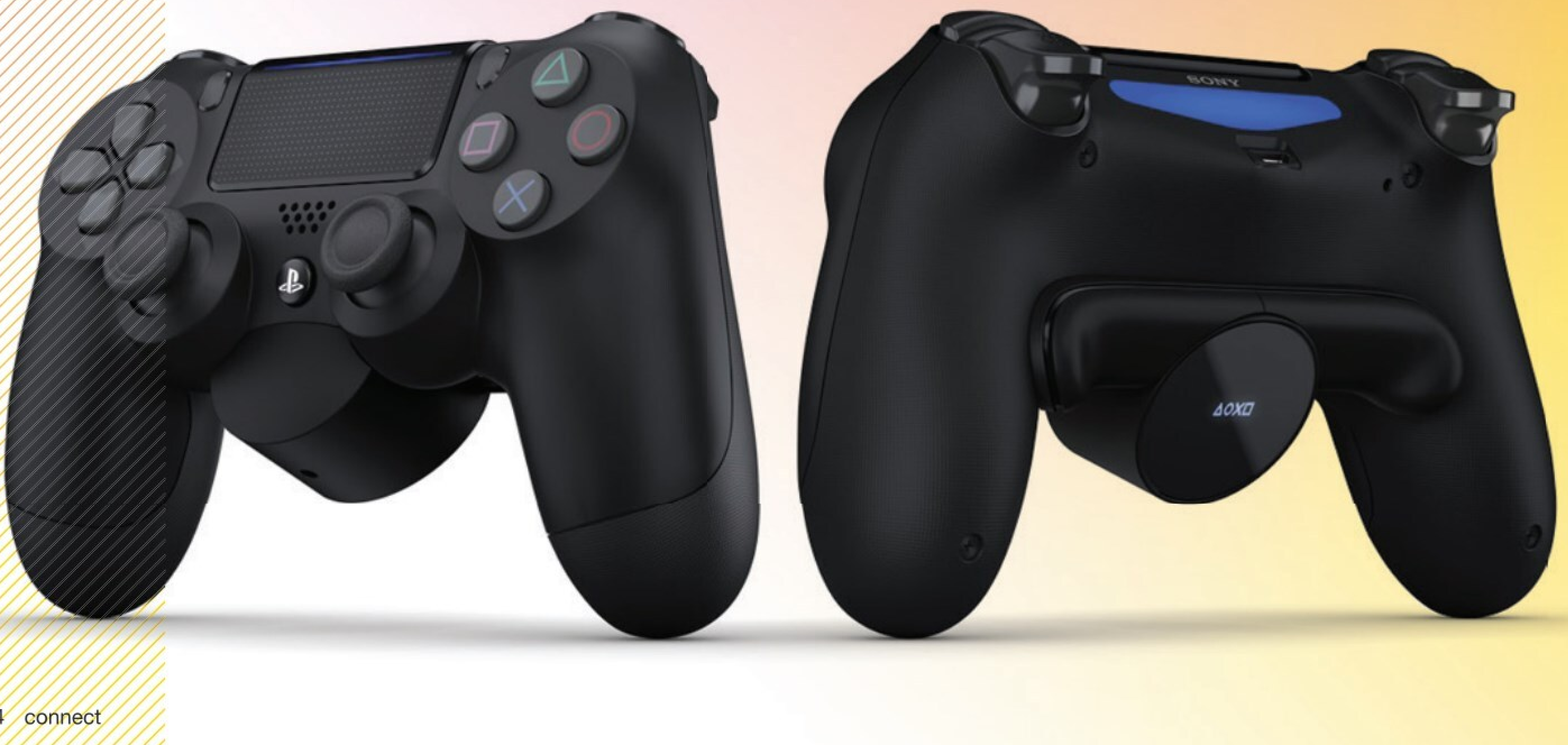
Within a few minutes, I was able to map leaning in Rainbow Six Siege to profile 1, reload and crouch for Call of Duty: Modern Warfare to profile 2, and light and medium kicks for Street Fighter V. My favorite use, however, is mapping jump to one of the buttons in Overwatch and using it to wall-ride as Lucio or flip around as Genji without sacrificing my ability to aim. You can even set the buttons to use more obscure commands you wouldn't think of, like the Options button or a particular direction on the d-pad. On the underside of the attachment is a 3.5mm headset port so you're not gaining one competitive edge at the cost of another.

The attachment is certainly geared toward competitive multiplayer games, but I found it useful on games that rely heavily on swift movement or combat like Spider-Man, Control, or even the recently released Journey to the Savage Planet for easy access to abilities or the jump button.

With high-quality, easily programmable buttons and a sleek design, the DualShock 4 Back Button Attachment delivers exceptional performance at a fraction of the cost of functionally comparable solutions. With a patent filed by Sony earlier this year showing potential back buttons on the PlayStation 5 controller, this may also be a great opportunity to familiarize yourself with a possible new feature for Sony's next console before the feature is even officially announced. ◆

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

$29.99 | playstation.com



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» *developer*
People Can Fly

» *release*
Holiday

by

Jeff Cork

BLAZING A NEW TRAIL

After an amicable split from Epic Games, People Can Fly is ready to spread its wings with the all-new RPG shooter ***OUTRIDERS***

EVERYTHING I'VE EVER LOVED IS GONE.

Family. Friends. Home. It's all back on a planet that can no longer sustain human life, a planet that we lost contact with 15 years ago. Earth is a distant memory, but there is hope: Our ship orbits Enoch, a planet that could give the 500 thousand souls on the *S.S. Flores* a chance at redemption. Perhaps this time we won't fail.

The probes have given us cause for celebration: Enoch is a rare breed of "Goldilocks" planets, which is neither too hot nor too cold to sustain human life, with a breathable atmosphere and gravitational pull that won't instantly crush us. Before we can colonize this rich new home, there's one final formality: The Outriders have to make a quick landfall and ensure that it is, indeed, the paradise scientists have promised us all. What could possibly go wrong?

Outriders is the latest project from People Can Fly, a studio that has gone all-in with the shooter genre since it was founded in 2002. Its first game, Painkiller, was a joyous celebration of old-school shooters, and subsequent releases like Bulletstorm and Gears of War: Judgment have demonstrated that the Polish developer is willing to push the boundaries of the genre. Its latest project is easily its most ambitious undertaking so far, attempting to tell a mature story within a shooter while incorporating the RPG and loot-collecting elements that have become increasingly more prevalent across the games industry. Also, you can turn people into skeletons with your mind, if you're into that sort of thing.

"Overall, the shooter genre is huge. We can ask ourselves why – probably people like to kill other people," jokes game director Bartosz Kmita. "Of course, some of the elements become redundant, become repetitive, so you're always looking for something new. You're always looking for what you can add to the genre, what you can change."

We visited the team in Warsaw, and it was tough not to draw some comparisons between Outriders' narrative about charting a new course and the tumultuous events that People Can Fly has undergone over the past few years. After a planned project was canceled following THQ's implosion in 2007, Epic Games became a majority stakeholder in the studio. There, they released Bulletstorm and Gears of War: Judgment, and worked on some other Epic projects, including tutorial content for the Unreal Engine and some work on Fortnite before its release.

"It was a bit contrary to how we see People Can Fly and how we see the future of the studio, and we didn't want to remain an internal outsource studio," says studio head Sebastian Wojciechowski. "We decided to chat about becoming independent, and it was great that Tim Sweeney and the other execs were supportive of this idea. In the middle of 2015, we became independent again."

Drama vampires will have to move along for their next meal. "Even though we split with Epic, the collaboration was awesome," Kmita says. "The experience we learned from them was great, we loved this company. But we always wanted to do our own stuff."

In this case, "their own stuff" is Outriders. "Overall, we've been doing shooters for two decades, so of course this is in our DNA for what we want to do," Kmita says. "But we were also a little bit tired of making them, so all the time we were thinking what we can do and what we can change to make the shooters that we love into something that would be enjoyable for us."

The idea? A three-person co-op game, where players can create their own unique hero, dominating the battlefield with powerful weapons and super hero-like abilities. Customization and flexibility were key, giving players the freedom to shape their character as they see fit – whether it is selecting the type of loot they prioritize, choosing the best personal build from a variety of different powers, or geeking out over a large skill tree. All the while, it is underpinned with solid shooting mechanics that reward skill.

They shopped their idea around to various publishers, and Square Enix was enthusiastic about the team's vision for a sci-fi shooter with RPG systems and loot. In fact, the publisher was more enthusiastic about it than People Can Fly had anticipated. "To be honest, we thought that we would grow by about twice," Kmita says. "That was the planned version. The unplanned version was that the guys from Square would want to make this idea a little bit bigger, and little by little it grew to a lot bigger. It was two things in parallel. One was the scope of the game, which grew, and the company had to grow, too, to fulfil the needs we had for the production at that point." The studio expanded from about 40 developers to a team of more than 200 – a decision that has necessitated an upcoming move to brand-new offices down the street.

During our visit, we had the opportunity to walk the increasingly packed offices and talk to some of the people behind Outriders. And to cap it all off, we played the game for several hours. "Gear of War meets Diablo" is a solid starting reference point for what to expect, but that oversimplification only tells a fraction of the story.

A NEW BEGINNING

We should have seen it coming. Climate change has ravaged the planet in Outriders' lore, and with that came increased seismic activity. "Over the course of 100 years on Earth, the scientists slowly discovered that these earthquakes were going to grow worse and worse," says lead writer Joshua Rubin. "These tremors were going to shake the world so much that cities would crumble and oceans would boil and Earth would be uninhabitable. And they had about 100 years. So of course, they told nobody."

In 2048, a massive earthquake claimed the lives of several hundred thousand people, and it was no longer possible for the ruling class to keep their heads beneath the vibrating sands. When humanity came to terms with the reality that life on Earth was reaching its sell-by date, it experimented with a variety of plans, including cities that floated on the ever-rising seas or were buried deep underground. The more ambitious proposal saw a future among the stars. A pair of ark-like ships, the *Caravel* and the *Flores*, were crafted in orbit above Edwards Air Force base. The goal? To find a new planet where humanity could make a new home. The Outriders were an instrumental part of this interstellar evacuation.

"Originally, the outriders were supposed to be the best of humanity," Rubin says. The Outriders are a bunch of mercs, survivors, and explorers who were recruited to be first boots on the ground on Enoch. Their mission was to secure a perimeter and prepare for the landing of the colony ship. Sounds simple, right?

Unfortunately, in what seems like an overarching theme, the plan failed in an unexpected way: The *Caravel* was destroyed before it could leave orbit. "Once most of them died on the first ship, there was this quick effort to improv by bringing together whoever was left," Rubin says. "The actual Outriders who go with you on this trip are this ragtag group of mercenaries and freelancers who are not tied to any type of authority. They are doing their best to improv their way on this new planet. They have to rebuild this mythology of the Outriders."

Before I can do my part in restoring their legacy, I must construct my Outrider. The character creator is simple, but robust. After picking my gender and one of several pre-baked faces, I could swap out a variety of haircuts, alter my eye color, and select from myriad scars and makeup styles, among other options. It's on the lighter side of customization – you won't be fussing over eye tilt or articulating individual points on the bridge of your hero's nose – but I was able to realize a general outline that I had in mind for my heroine using preset features: a latter-day Sarah Connor type, which fittingly, was one of the archetypical touchstones People Can Fly's team used as inspiration for their female characters.

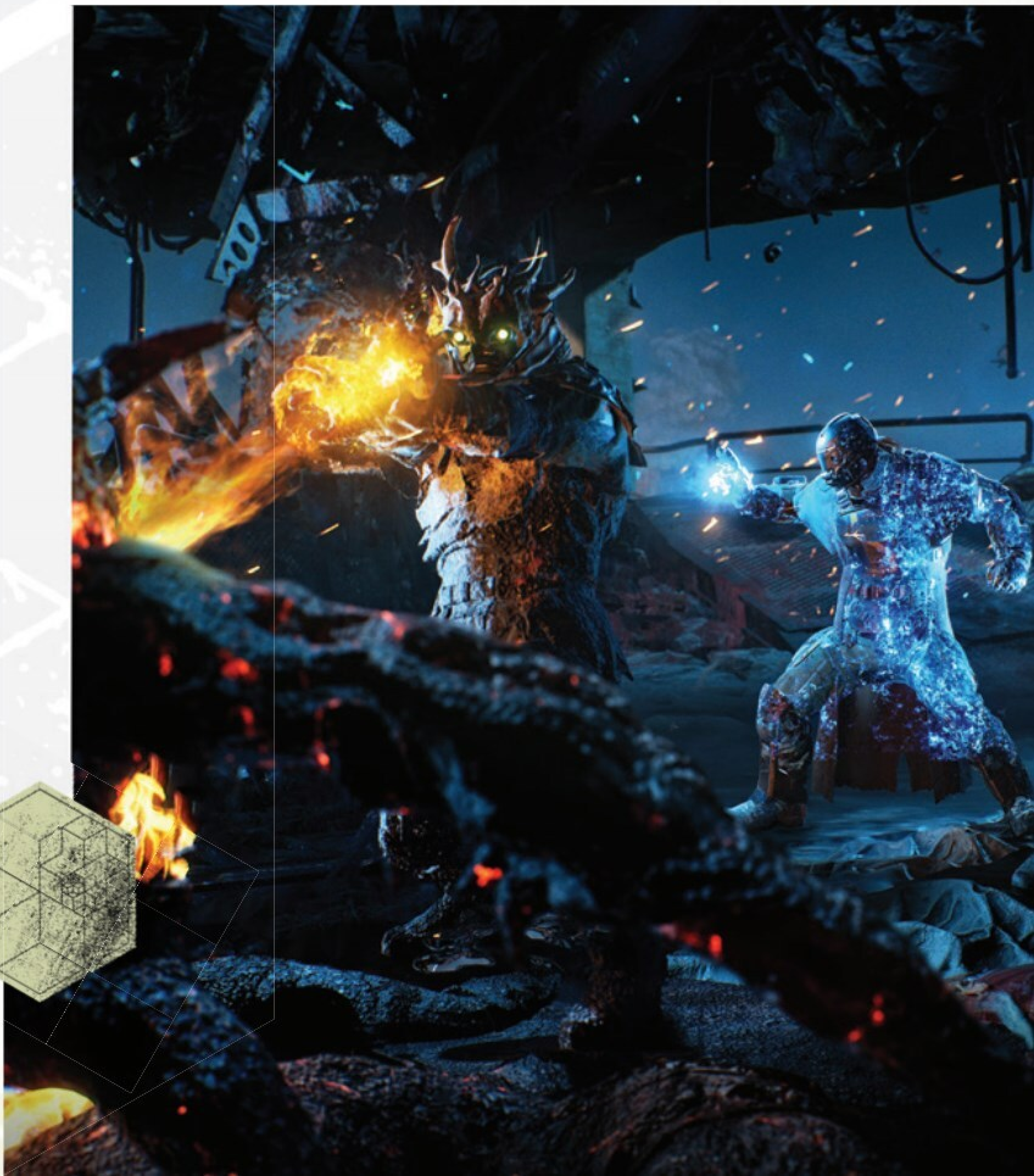
From orbit, Enoch does indeed seem like a promising location. Those feelings are confirmed when our landing pod detaches from the *Flores* in orbit and descends to the planet's surface. From space, our pod looks tiny, but when the bay doors open it provides a greater sense of scale. It's the size of a city block, and a small army of Outriders and military supervisors emerge – the first time any of us have been outside the ship since its 82-year voyage. Unbelievably, Enoch is everything they said it would be. It doesn't really matter either way, since we lost contact with Earth 15 years ago, and there is no plan B.

There's an unmistakable alien quality to the planet, but it's remarkable just how Earth-like it appears. Even though they're covered in glowing blue fungal colonies, the trees look like what we had back at home. And while they're a little weird looking, there are small mammalian critters that scatter when they see us approaching, just like deer. Several huge trucks circle around what will serve as a base camp as people mill around and figure out how to best approach the mission. Before we can begin

HOW'S NEXT GEN COMING ALONG?

We played our demo on PCs, although Outriders is coming to consoles, too. Not only is it coming to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, it's slated for release on the upcoming PlayStation 5 and Xbox next-gen systems. I asked if what we played on PC would be indicative of how it performed on those upcoming systems, and I was told that it would look even better. Unfortunately, they wouldn't provide any additional details.

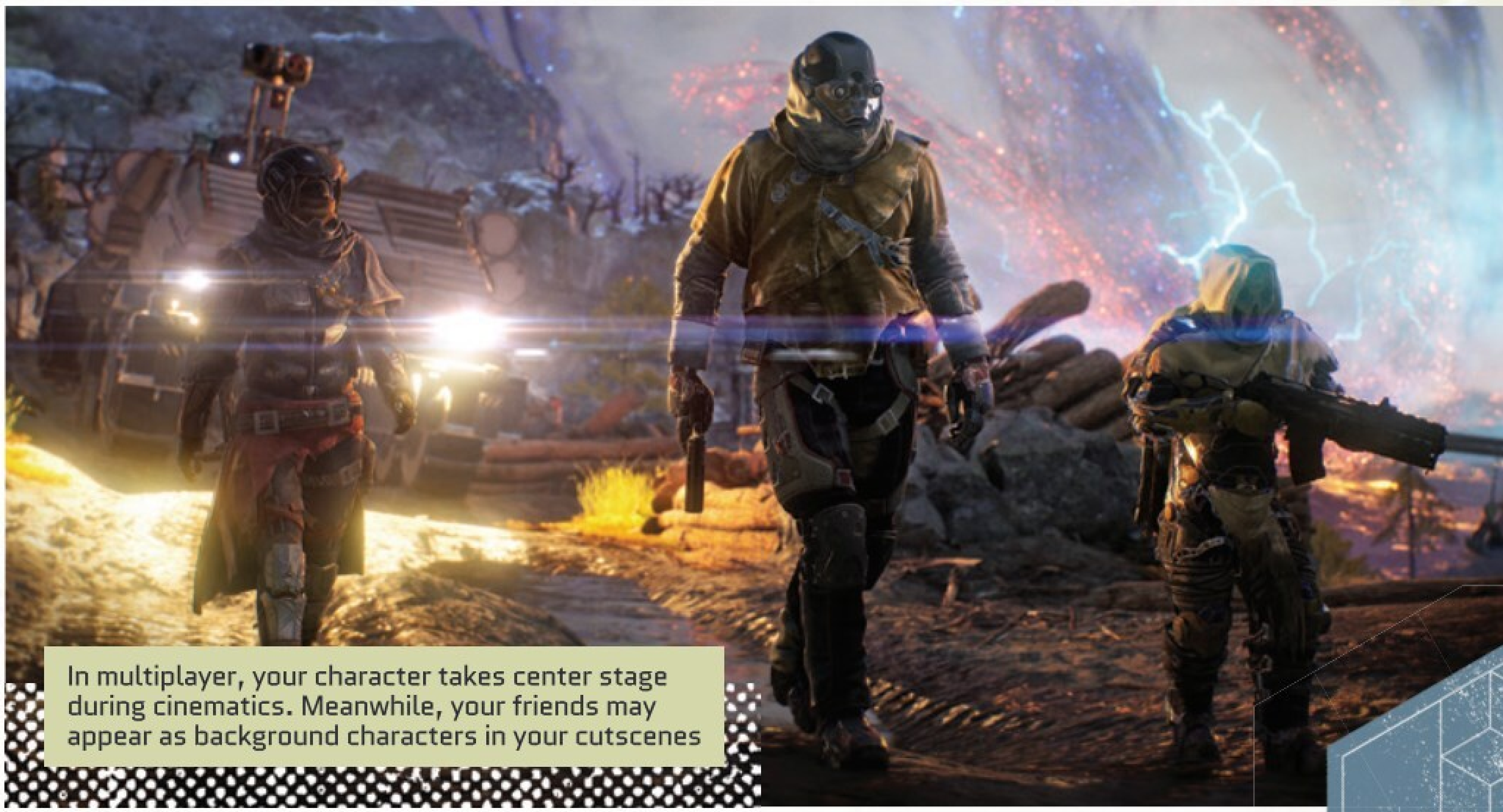
Overall, it's clear that we're in a strange time for the console transition. Hardware makers have provided basic hardware specs, but People Can Fly wasn't comfortable sharing concrete details on how the game will run on these new machines. The development tools are still apparently works in progress, but the people I spoke with about it seemed confident that the next gen would let them add additional visual polish than would be otherwise possible. We'll have to be patient to see what that means in practice.



mass landings, we have to find the probes.

I run into my captain, a man named Tanner who's wearing a cowboy hat and sunglasses. He's marveling over the fresh air. Sensing my apprehension, he says I should look at this as a new beginning. He adds that I can build a cabin, grow old, and get fat. Whatever I do, I shouldn't waste this opportunity. I make my way over to a makeshift shooting range, which overlays a VR-like simulation over the natural landscape. Here, I get to do something a little more engaging than walking around and talking to my fellow explorers.

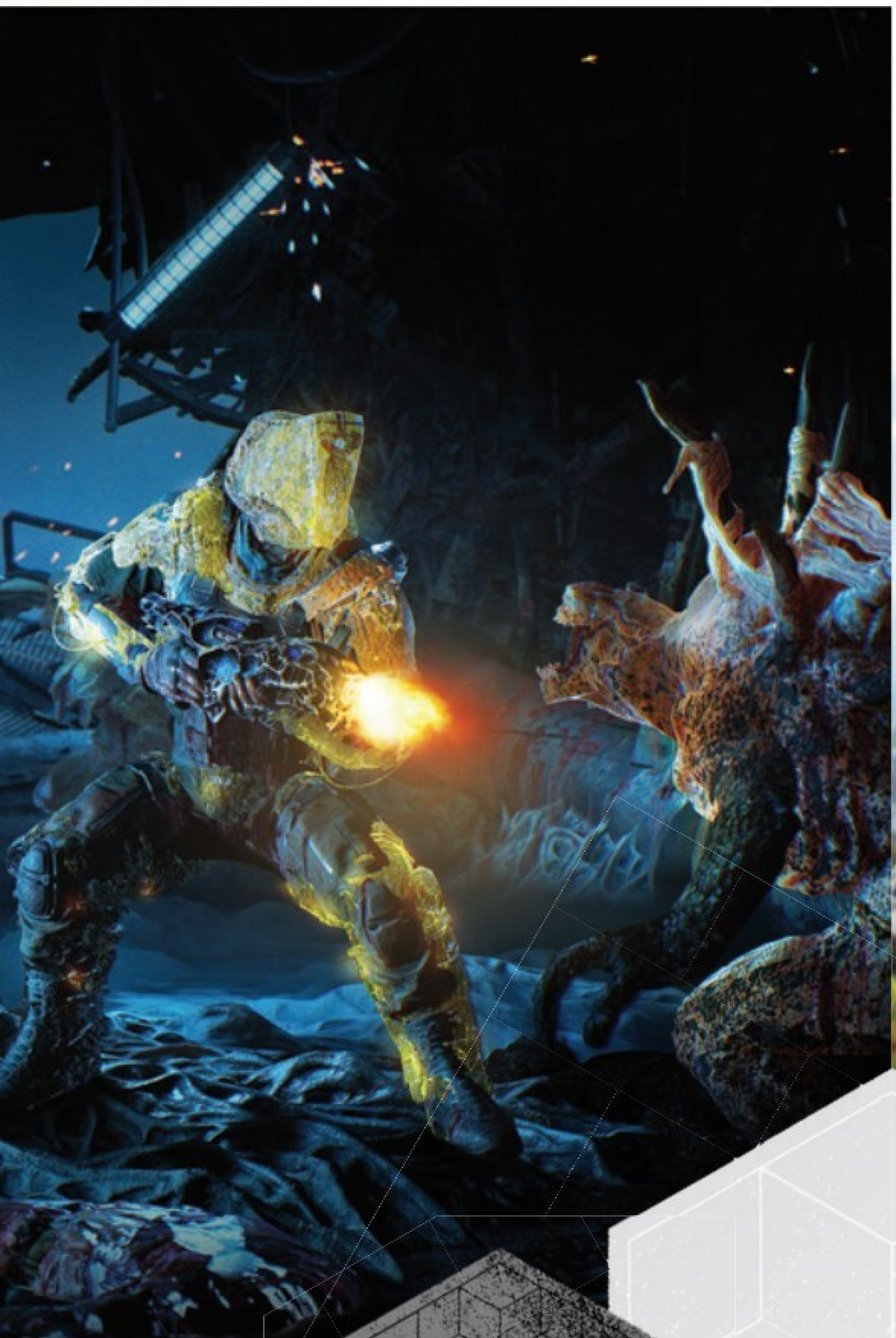
The live-fire exercise gives me a chance to see how the weapons handle. As virtual enemies dart in and out of cover, I blast into them with an assault rifle and handgun. There's a cover system, which allows my character to snap in and out with the press of a button, and transition from cover to cover by aiming at a new location and pressing the cover button. It's pretty standard cover-shooter action, but it feels responsive and I'm able to blaze through the exercise without any problems.

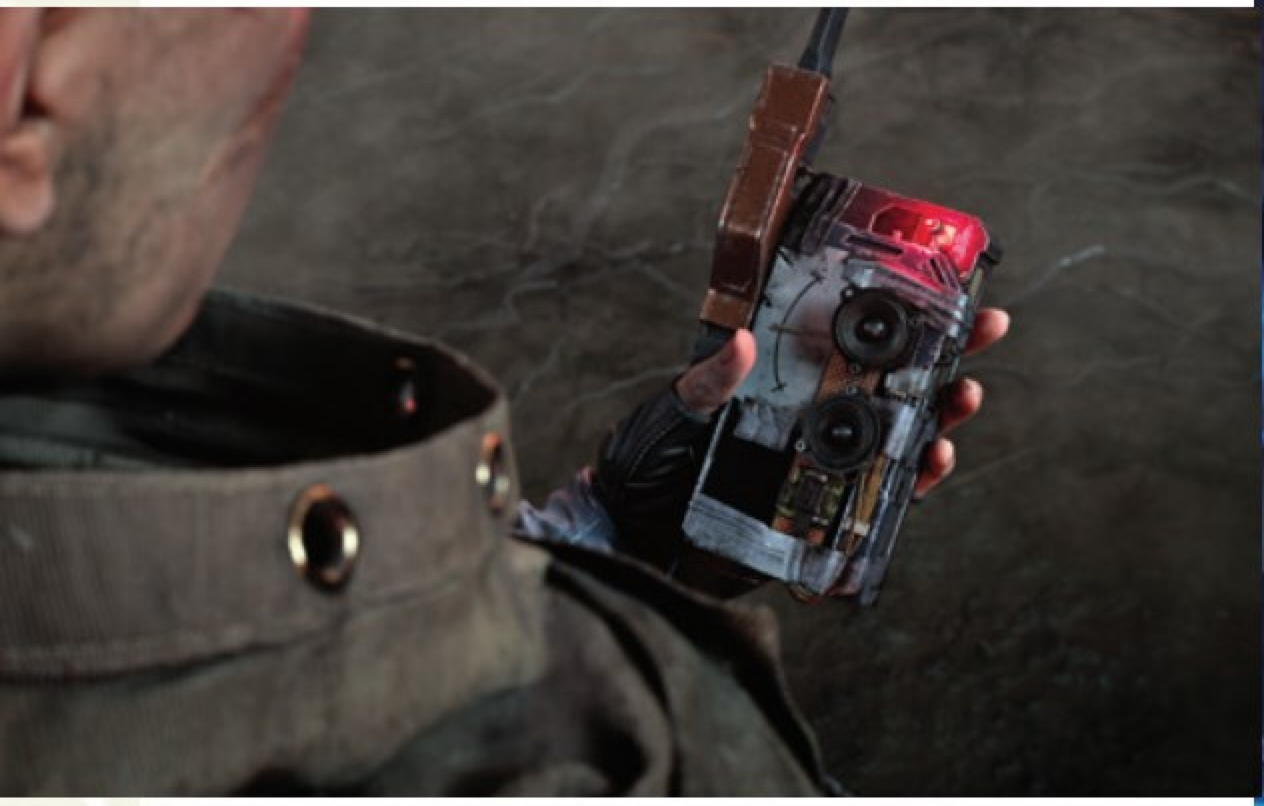

In multiplayer, your character takes center stage during cinematics. Meanwhile, your friends may appear as background characters in your cutscenes

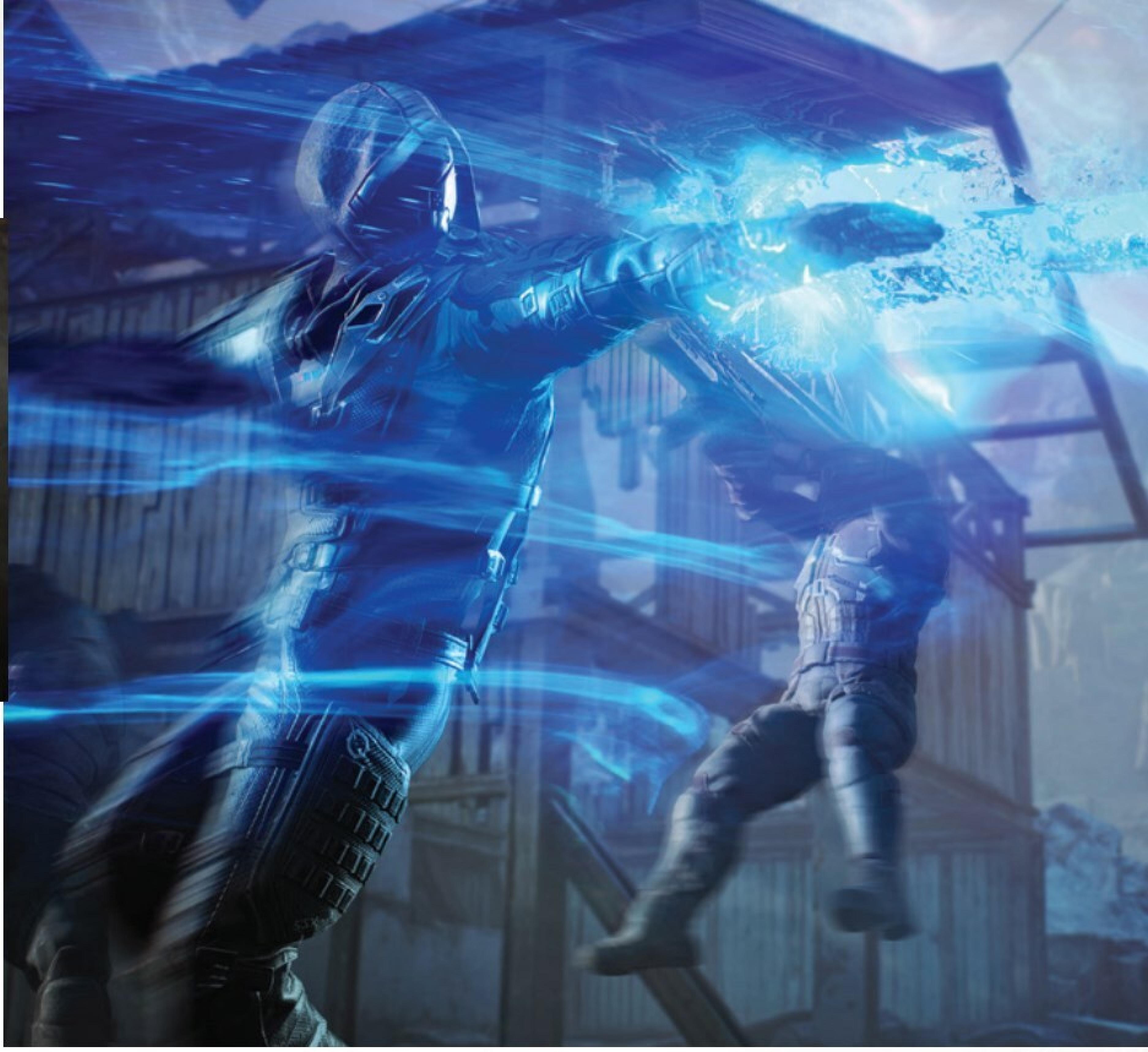
Afterward, I get to talk to Jakub, my friend who's in charge of the shooting gallery. I'm given several dialogue options, with critical conversation points marked with stars and optional choices that flesh out the world and the relationships between characters. Jakub is not as optimistic as Tanner seems to be. "He is a very cynical man," Rubin says. "He's someone who sees the worst in humanity at all times. He's someone who always has something funny and awful to say about any situation." The conversations are impressively staged. Characters move around realistically as we talk rather than stand rigidly in my face to recite dialogue. At one point, our characters sit down without interrupting the flow of their conversation. It's a small detail that people who instinctively skip dialogue sections may not care about, but it highlights the care that People Can Fly is putting into its story and presentation.

Jakub is a bit of a downer, so I talk to Shira. She's using a fancy transparent tablet to take pictures of the surrounding beauty. We joke that there isn't an Internet for her to post them to, but she's confident that the entire thing was backed up and that we'll have access to all of humanity's combined knowledge – and a place to send photos – within a few weeks. That is, once we locate the probe. I don't have as much of a history with Shira as I do with Tanner and Jakub, but she seems like a positive force in our new world. "The military is there to watch over the Outriders, because the Outriders are this ragtag group of mercenaries who are not trusted by the military, and Shira is there to be the voice between them," Rubin says.

By now, I'm getting as antsy playing as you may be reading this. Earth is dead. Got it. The new planet is cool. Understood. Is anything going to actually happen here? This is a shooter, right? Don't worry – things ramp up significantly in just a few awful moments.







A MYSTERIOUS SIGNAL

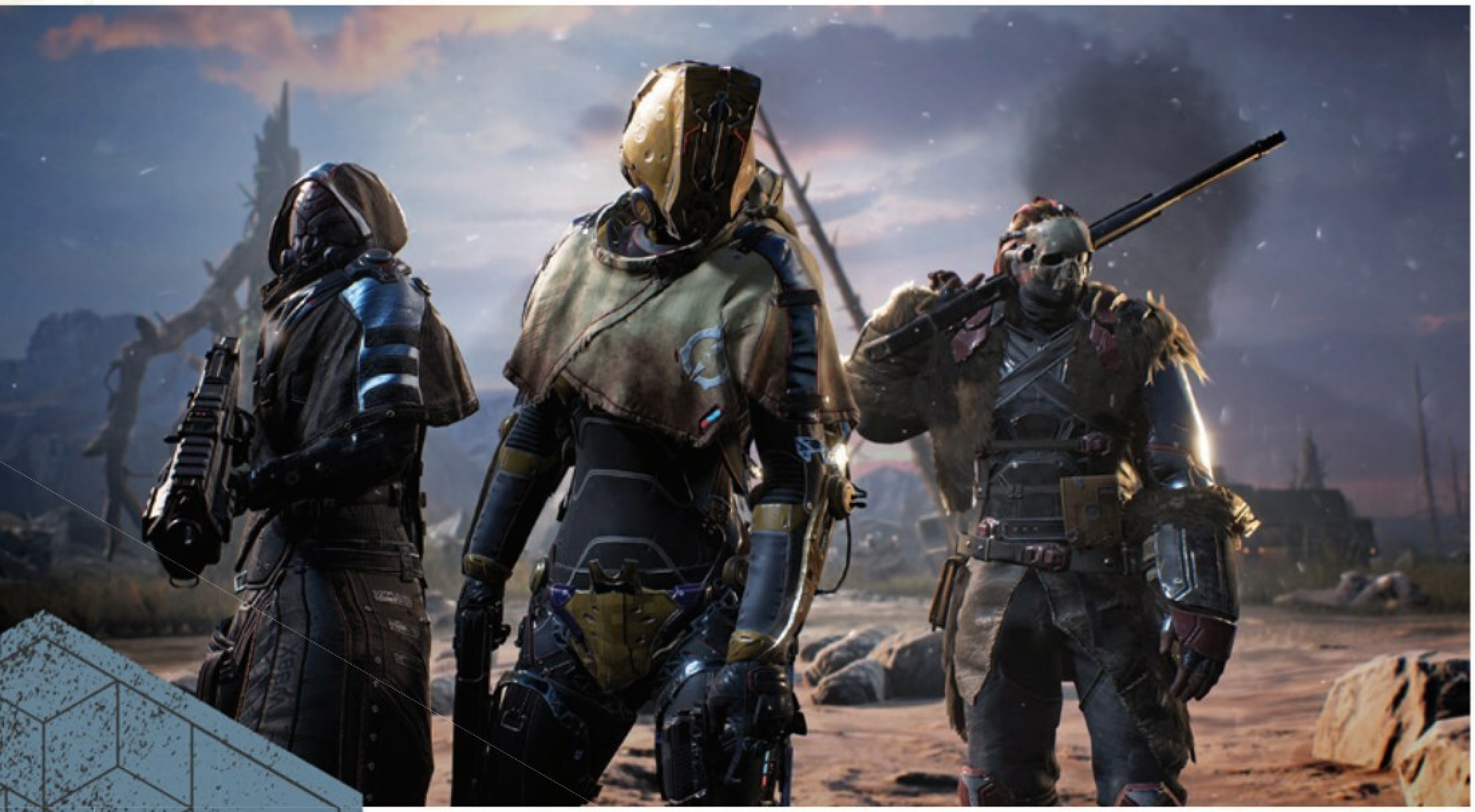
Engineers and workers begin dismantling our landing craft, repurposing its engine to power our budding colony. From there, the plan is to start thawing out civilians and sending them planetside, a few thousand at a time. We'll have to pace ourselves to accommodate the new arrivals, making sure that our infrastructure can support this drain on resources. All signs point to this being a remarkably calm transition, a leap of faith that's ended with a solid landing.

A military commander, Sergeant Major Charles Maxwell, pushes us to get going. I follow Tanner and several other Outriders as we make our way toward the probe. Trucks roll ahead, knocking down trees and creating a path for us to follow. Suddenly, our vehicles break down, as if they've been hit by a Hollywood-style EMP. Everything stops. We regroup, and it begins raining. Shira smiles as the droplets hit her face. Then I notice that oily black drops are mixed in. Some of it hits an Outriders' face and mouth. He spits it out as best he can. The substance covers a tree in shimmer darkness, and Shira reaches out to touch it. We stop her before she can make contact. Droplets rise from the ground. It's an ominous spectacle, but Tanner is fixated on the probe.

The goo has either agitated or transformed some of the local wildlife, and it attacks. It's a strange, hulking beast, perhaps best described as a mix between a hyena and cow. It charges, and I dodge out of the way, firing at its back as it overshoots my position. After a few failed lunges, I finally knock it down for good. We get to the probe and take its hard drive. We thought the probe had been broadcasting a strange signal, but that's not actually the case. The device was in relay mode, merely amplifying another signal that is coming from somewhere else on the planet.

Before we can ponder this impossibility, things completely fall apart. Rocks begin hovering, and we're overwhelmed by a low-frequency rumbling sound. Orange shockwaves knock down trees, and we radio back home for help. Help isn't coming, so we race back on foot. I run down a path as trees fall around me and energy tendrils reach out toward me. The humming sound has been replaced with explosions and screaming. It's absolute chaos. A nearby Outrider is pulled into the air and then vaporized. In a truck, the driver who ingested some of the black substance vomits it out.

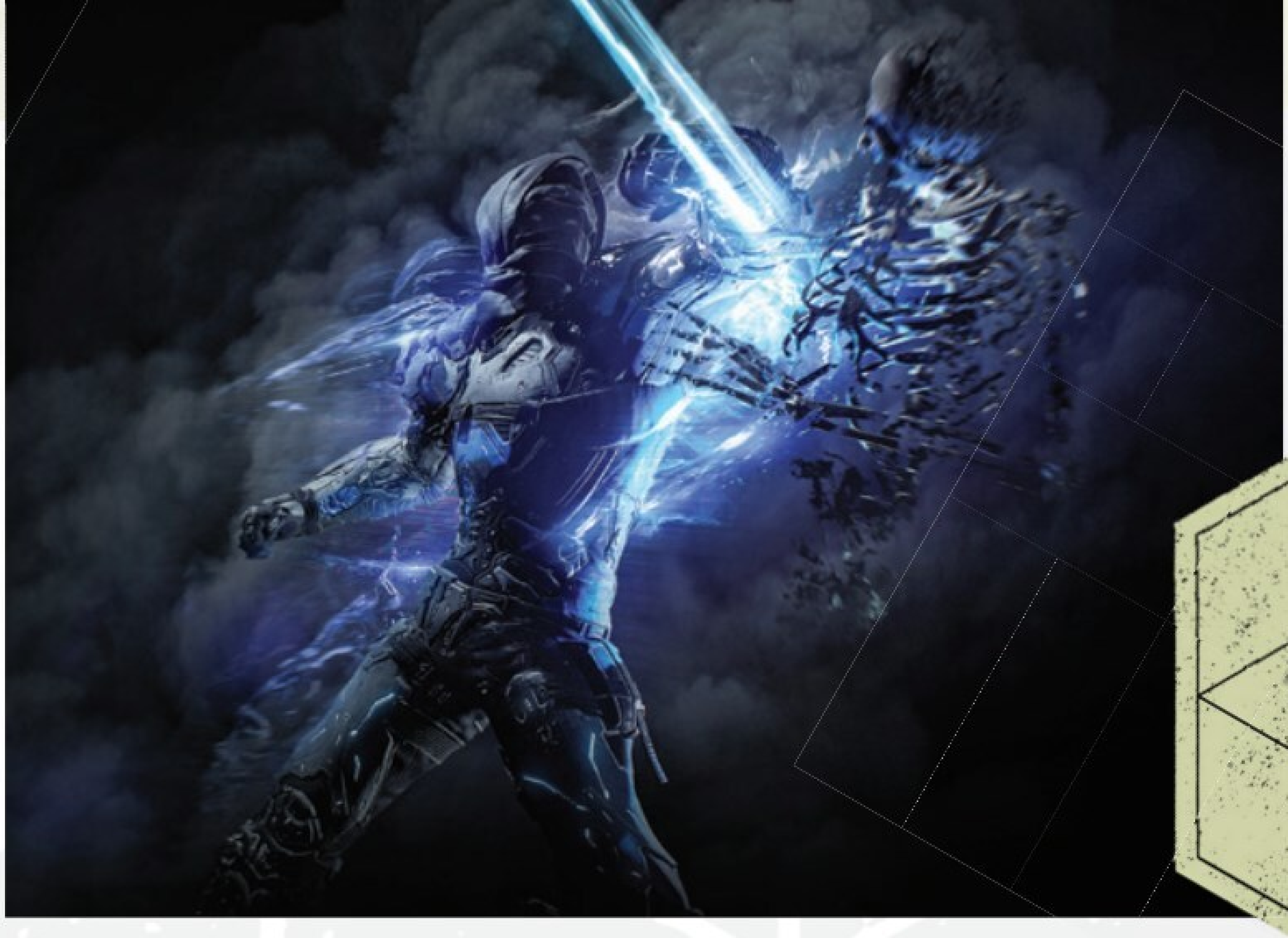
Our escape is cut off by Sgt. Maxwell and his military escort. It's clear that we have to hold the landing until we can figure out what exactly is going on, but he says it's too late, and that there's nowhere else to go. Tanner attempts to argue, but Maxwell kills the Outrider commander. He walks away, telling his goons to burn the bodies. The escorts open fire on the rest of us, and we're now engaged in a full-on



shootout. I use what I learned in the earlier training exercise to move between cover, hitting the rogue soldiers with headshots while steadily moving ahead from cover to cover. One of the enemies drops a new weapon, and I equip it. I'm glad I did, because it's a significant upgrade; every few shots fire off an explosive round that causes enemies to blast apart, causing bleed damage on nearby foes. Every successful hit does damage, which is indicated by a number that appears over the enemy's head. Introducing RPG elements like varying damage can be tricky when implemented in shooters, where skill and accuracy are usually the most important elements. People Can Fly is keenly aware of this balancing act.

"It's super challenging, because not only are you growing in power, but you somehow have to fulfill it," Kmita says. "Most games are doing, 'Ok, how to balance the gameplay? Let's raise the health. That's the easiest thing.' That's the problem that we're talking about. Enemies become bullet sponges, or the guns start working less and aren't doing proper damage. Overall, the balance is a huge thing for us."

Even though I manage to survive the onslaught, I've seen better days. I can't say if it's the fight or the exposure to whatever caused gravity to flip out (not to mention that black goo), but Shira senses it, too. She hustles me over to our camp's medical bay and puts me back into a cryo-storage chamber until a medical technician can evaluate me. In the meantime, it's obvious that she has bigger priorities on her hands.



TRICKSTER

A highly mobile attacker who uses teleportation and time-bending skills to control the arena

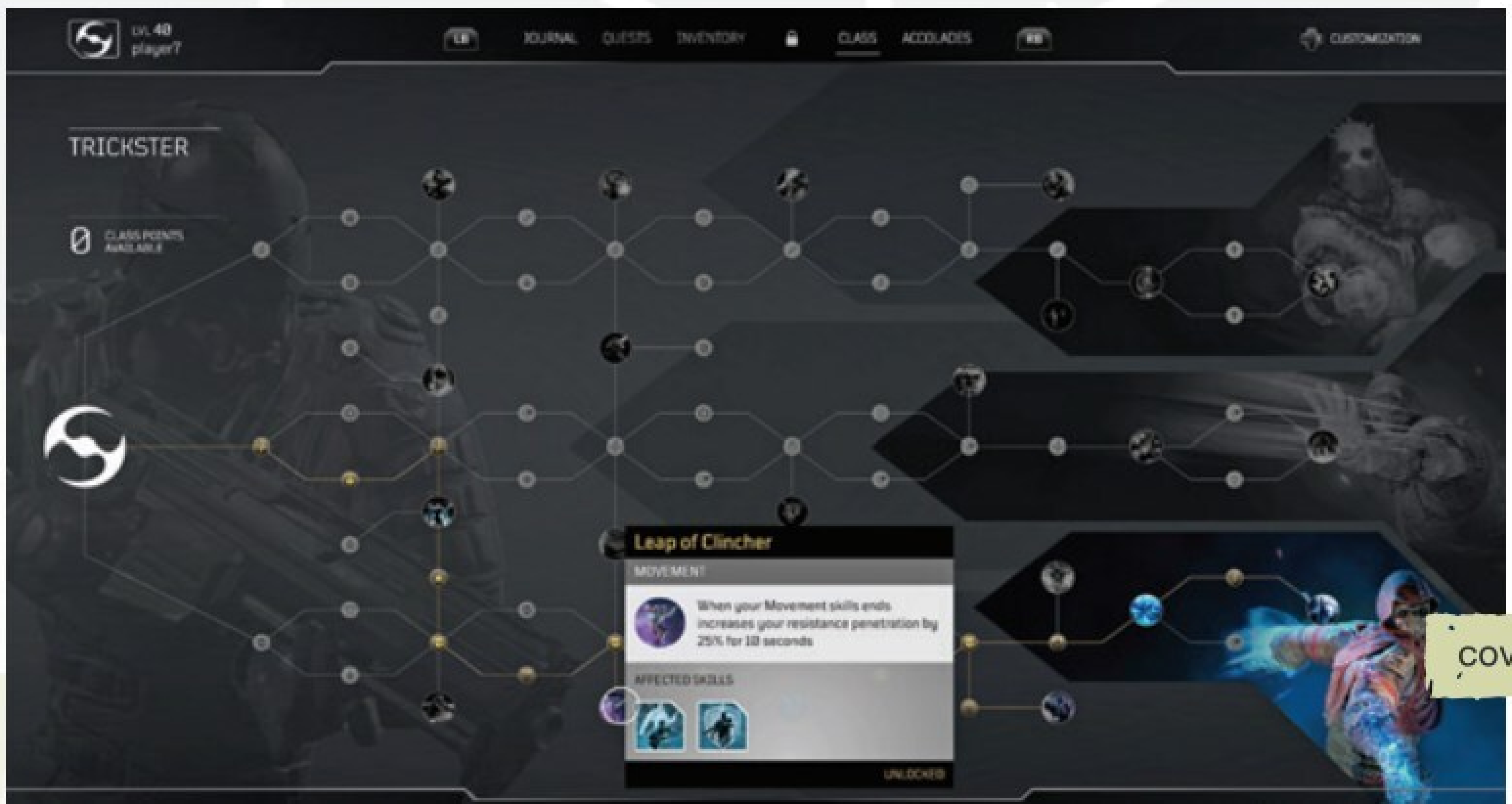
The Trickster is as unpredictable as the anomaly that gave this class its unusual abilities. At its core, it's designed to give players unparalleled control over their position and control the overall flow of combat encounters. To provide a sense of how important its teleporting abilities can be, People Can Fly has given players access to two separate warp techniques. The first, Borrowed Time, lets players plant an escape point, which they can instantly teleport back to if things get hairy. The second, Hunt for Prey is a bit more aggressive, letting players pick a target and then materialize behind them for a sneak attack.

Other abilities include Temporal Slice, which slows enemies. Roundslice Spin is a perfect followup, turning players into whirling dervishes of doom for a brief (but devastating) period of time. Twisted Bullets imbue the Trickster's ammo with additional damage-dealing capabilities until the next reload. The Trickster's skills have a tendency to pull the flesh off her opponents, so don't be surprised to see a trail of rib cages and other gruesome signs of her handiwork.

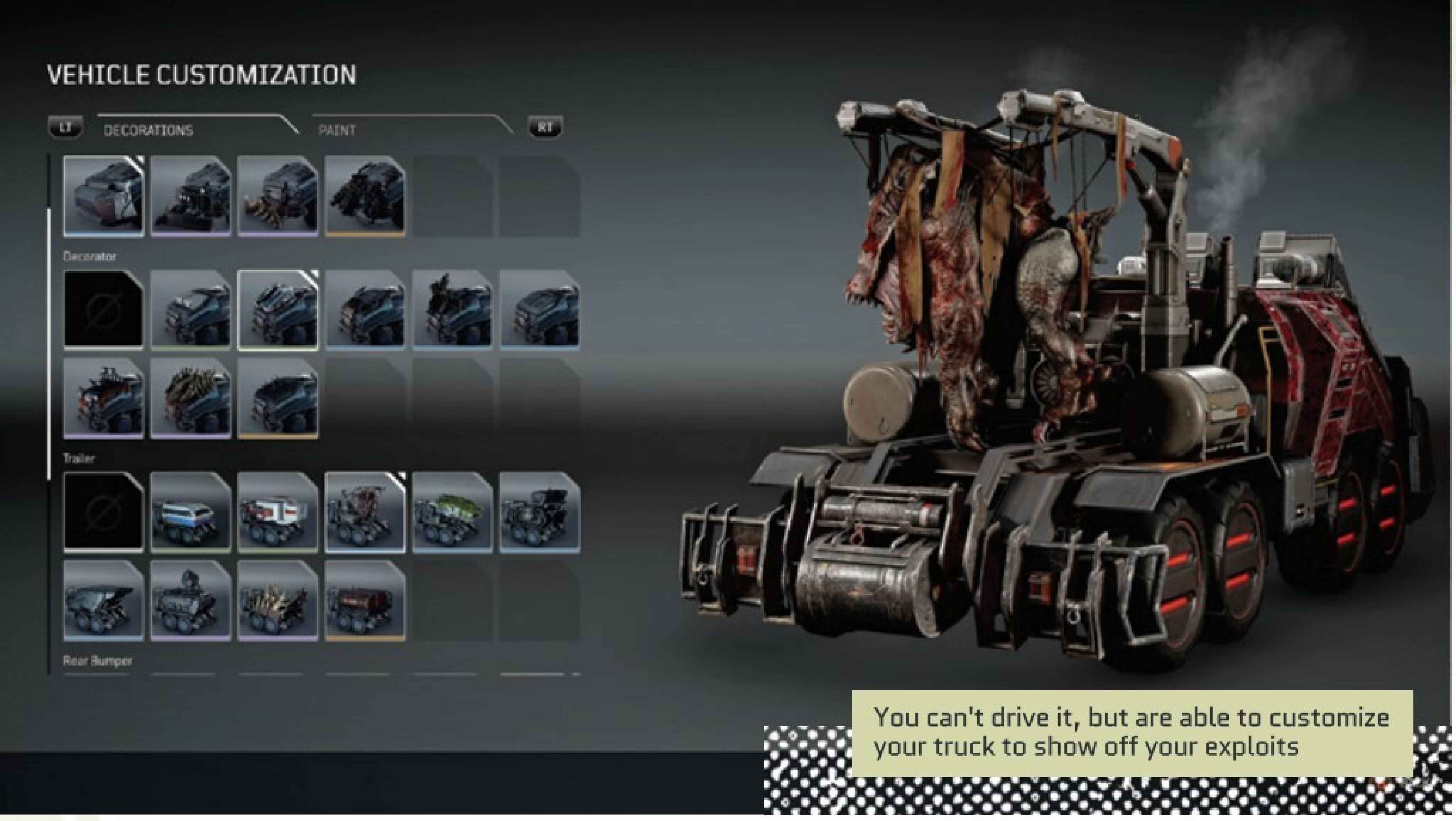
Slow Trap is perhaps the most important ability in the arsenal, however. This power manifests as a dome-like field in the arena, and any enemies that fall within its field are slowed down immensely. "You can slow down the enemies, you can slow down the bullets, you can slow down the projectiles that are coming to you," says game director Bartosz Kmita. That opens them up for attacks, and also serves as a great crowd control maneuver. In group play, it synergizes with just about any DPS attacks, ensuring that most run-of-the-mill enemies that are caught inside are essentially toast.

Tricksters have a tendency to annihilate anything they get close to, which is kind of the idea. To reinforce that, players who choose this class will regenerate health as they kill enemies that are close by. You can certainly hang back and snipe from afar, but it's best to get close every once in a while to keep healthy.

FANTASY ANALOG: ROGUE



When your Movement skills ends increases your resistance penetration by 25% for 10 seconds



You can't drive it, but are able to customize your truck to show off your exploits

STARTING FRESH

I awaken with a start, collapsing to the ground while heaving. How much time has passed? An alarm is going off, and a pair of scavengers seem just as surprised by our meeting as I am. One of them asks when I'm from, which is never a good sign. Before we can continue the conversation, they sprint off, saying that they're coming for us – another comment that's never a good sign.

A powerful-looking man clad in improvised armor strides into the scene, equally surprised to see me there. He says that he thought the Outriders were all dead. Regardless, he isn't particularly interested in learning more. Something called the anomaly is coming, and he says that he wants to see how quickly I can run. Unfortunately, going back into the cryo chamber doesn't appear to be an option at this time.

I'm stripped of my gear and taken to the back of a flatbed truck. The sequence is as chaotic as my first encounter with this strange phenomenon, though it's clear that some time has passed. People appear to have settled into Enoch, though not in a "Home sweet home" needlepoint kind of way. Bodies swing from trees, and I see a hulking figure equipped with a flamethrower torching piles of corpses. Prisoners cower in dog pens. In the background, I hear chatter about this group wanting to storm the ECA base. Whatever this is, it isn't a place I want to linger.

Then I see the anomaly. It looks like the shrinking circle in a battle-royale game, a swirling, shimmering energy field that clearly has the attention of everyone nearby. I break my cuffs and run for it, doing my best to outpace the encroaching phenomenon – an attempt that's cut short as a length of rebar impales me straight in the center of my chest. This feels a lot like an ending, but my trip in Outriders is finally beginning.

There's a lot going on in Outriders, and it draws from so many inspirations that it's a little daunting to sort through it all. In case you couldn't tell, the story is a big part of it. Rubin, the lead writer, is an experienced narrative designer who co-wrote Assassin's Creed II, and has credits including The Walking Dead and Destiny. From the outset of the project, the team wanted to give players a compelling reason to keep moving ahead, in addition to the naturally appealing looter-shooter gameplay.

There are two main mysteries that propel players forward in Outriders' first few hours. First, there's the signal. The player character has been out of action for several decades, as it turns out, and humanity has indeed settled into Enoch. That colonization has been brutal, thanks to the second hook: the anomaly. The force has crippled technology, creating an environment where inhabitants have had to dig into a valley and battle over dwindling resources. All the while, the signal beckons.

"They've never been able to get out of the valley to find out what it is, and you're the only person who scrawled the frequency on your hand with a Sharpie that's still there 30 years later that can actually go and find it," Rubin says. "All we know is that the anomaly has completely destroyed any type of electronics more complicated than a light bulb. There should not be a digital signal playing from anywhere on this planet. The fact that there is means there might be a place beyond the anomaly, and if you can reach that maybe there's a way humanity

can begin again."

The anomaly did more than conk out electronics. People who have been exposed to its power face myriad fates. "When you wake up 30 years later, it's not just the world that's changed," Josh says. "The anomaly has pushed the flora and the fauna and changed their DNA and made them more aggressive. But you and your fellow Outriders have also been changed. It's because of this power that has been infused into you, it's very unpredictable, this power, it changes physics upside-down, so most people it rips apart. Some come back with almost the power of gods. The Altered are worshiped as gods by the people who live there, they're respected and they're feared."

Fortunately, I'm among those who survived my brush with this uncanny force. I'm now taken to a class-selection screen, where I'm able to choose from one of four available classes. During my visit I get to play three of them – Trickster, Pyromancer, and Devastator (see sidebars) – but the fourth is tantalizingly out of reach. I start out with a Devastator, joining *Game Informer* video producer Leo Vader's Trickster character for some co-op action.

PYROMANCER

Pyromancer

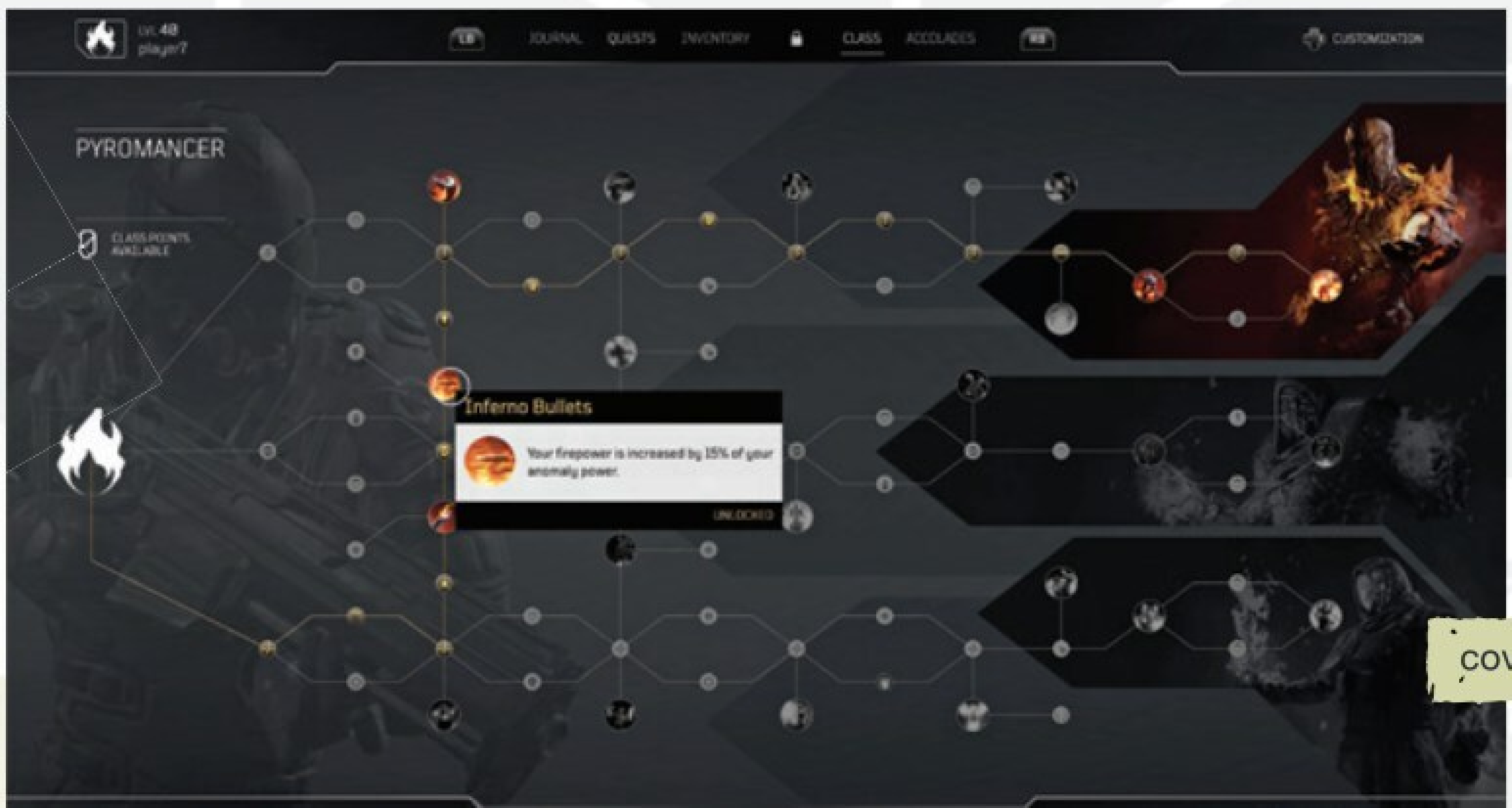
Fire is a friend to this powerful combatant, who uses debuffs and area of effect blasts to come out on top

Players who are looking for a classic glass-cannon archetype may gravitate toward the Pyromancer. This class doesn't have as deep a health pool as the other Outriders, but he makes up for it in pure DPS. Not only that, but his reliance on fire-based attacks makes him one of the most visually impressive combatants we've seen in the game.

As with all Outriders, players will be able to unlock seven class skills for the Pyromancer. Some of the highlights include Thermal Bomb, which sets victims ablaze, with the added bonus of an area-of-effect explosion if the target dies while the effect is active. Overheat is another dual-purpose ability, knocking enemies who get too close back a bit, while also unleashing another AoE burning effect. If you don't yet notice a pattern, perhaps Heatwave will drive it home: This one summons a wave of fire, which – you guessed it – engulfs anyone in its path in flames.

Pyromancer may not have a lot of health, but his regeneration synergizes perfectly with his skillset. "His healing mechanic is that you're marking enemies with your skills and when they die then you will rejuvenate health," says game director Bartosz Kmita. "You don't even need to kill them – you can just mark them and your allies can kill them for you and you will regenerate your health." Like all the classes, he's a viable option in solo play. He really seemed to shine in multiplayer, however, where his ability to spray the arena with debuffs and lingering effects meant his health was constantly being topped off.

FANTASY ANALOG: MAGE



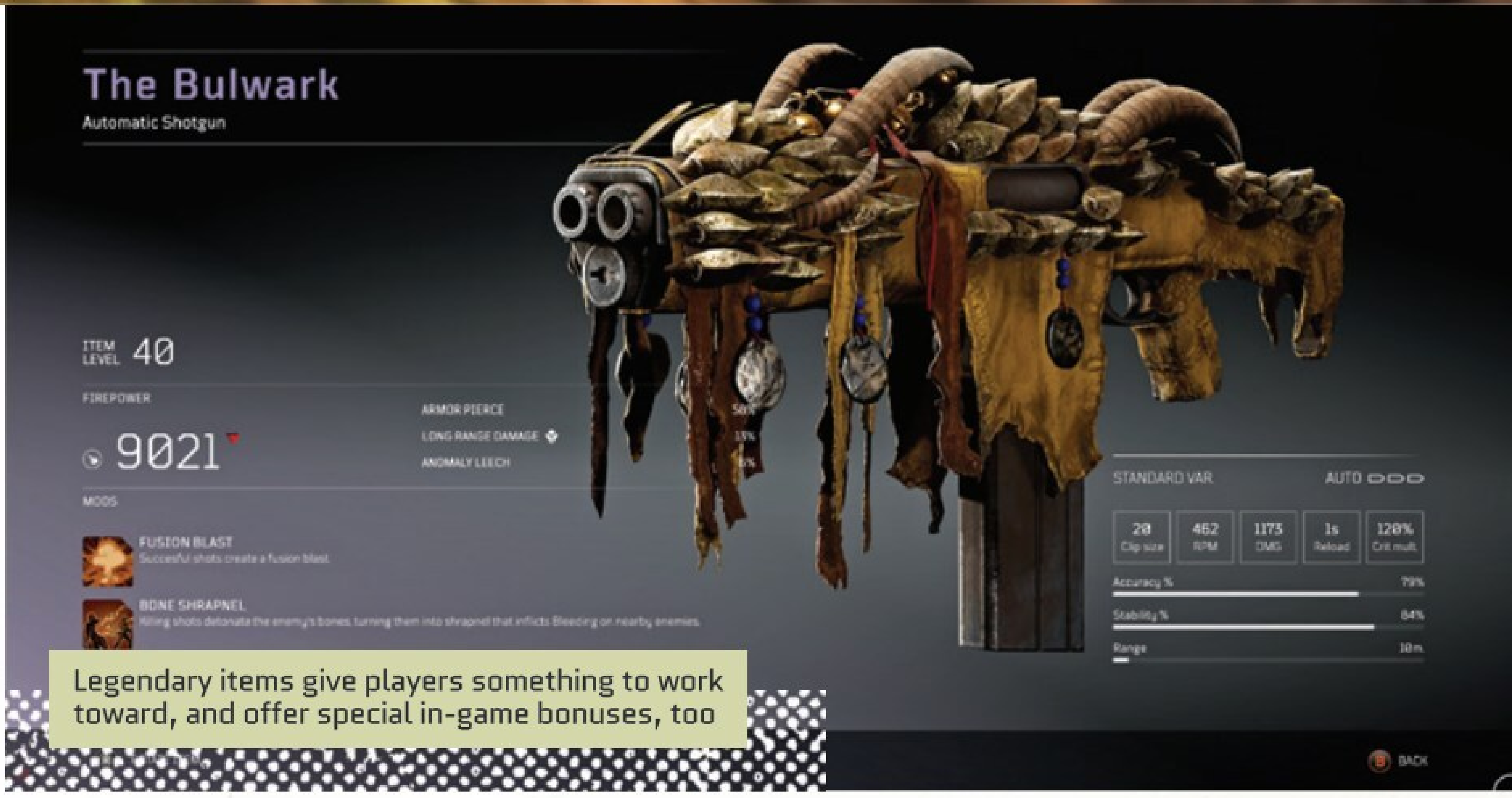
Inferno Bullets

Your firepower is increased by 15% of your anomaly power.

UNLOCKED

A CHANGING BATTLEFIELD

Initially, Outriders played like a fairly standard cover shooter. All the bells and whistles were there – running over cover, blind firing, and all that jazz – but it didn't seem as though it was doing anything really different. That sentiment is completely gone after choosing a class. Once you're able to wield the power of the anomaly, it shifts from feeling like a straight-up shooter to one that leans heavily on action-RPG elements. We've played similar hybrids, including entries in the Destiny and Borderlands series, but Outriders' comparatively shorter cooldowns lets you put your abilities to use more often. They're not something you hoard like an ultimate in Overwatch, but another tool in your arsenal that you wield with regularity.


The Bulwark
Automatic Shotgun

ITEM LEVEL 40

FIREPOWER 9021

ARMOR PIERCE
LONG RANGE DAMAGE
ANOMALY LEECH

MODS

FUSION BLAST
Successful shots create a fusion blast.

BONE SHRAPNEL
Killing shots detonate the enemy's bones, turning them into shrapnel that inflicts Bleeding on nearby enemies.

STANDARD VAR AUTO

20	462	1173	1s	120%
Clip size	RPM	DMG	Reload	Crit mult

Accuracy % 79%
Stability % 84%
Range 10m.

Legendary items give players something to work toward, and offer special in-game bonuses, too

Alone, I'm a powerful force. I can rush up to enemy groups and harden my skin, passively absorbing their lifeforce as I blast them apart with a shotgun. When a guy unloads a chaingun at me, I turn to him and stop his volley of bullets a few feet from my face. Then I hurl it back to him with devastating effects. It feels great, and when things get a little out of control I can retreat back to cover and wait a few seconds for my abilities to recharge.

It's even better with a friend, though. Leo's Trickster drops time-slowing bubbles around the battlefield, giving me ample opportunity to take affected enemies out. All the while, he blips around the arena, warping behind enemies for melee attacks and darting back to sniper range to finish off any stragglers.

Popping open the skill tree, I'm surprised to see how robust it appears to be. There are three trees for each of the characters, which prioritize different elements according to a player's style. Smaller orbs provide stat bumps, while larger nodes change the gameplay in potentially significant ways. For instance, you can bump your shotgun damage by 12 percent along the way to unlocking the Shotgun Master node, which not only increases the damage that weapon outputs by 20 percent but also increases the drop rate for shotguns. Another skill, Unbroken Vow, gives Devastators a 100-percent chance to ignore death damage and heal players for 50 percent of their maximum health automatically every three minutes.

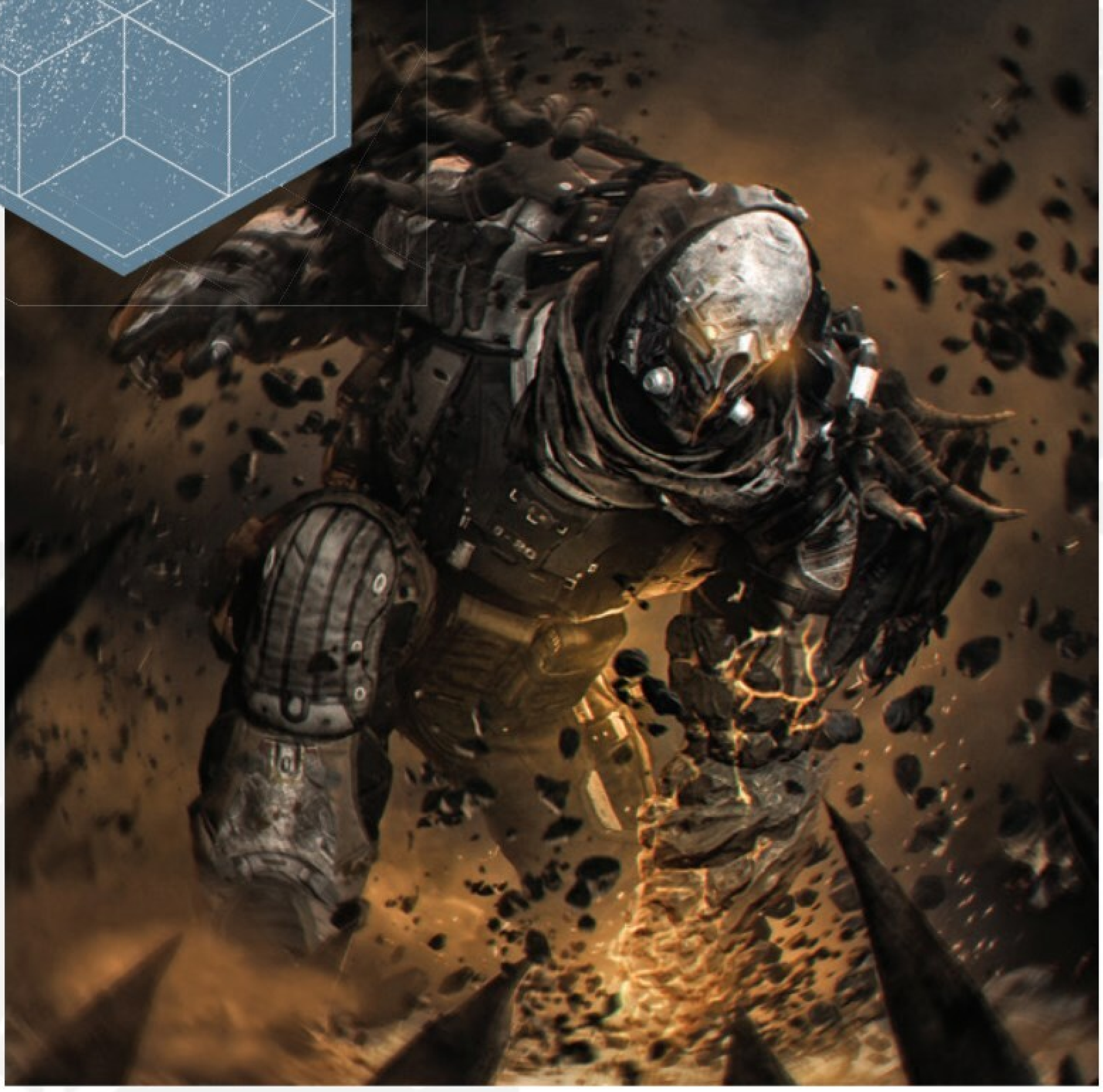
"We're trying to build a comp for the skills not only for yourself, but with the other people that you're playing with to somehow complement them to make it where everyone has a role," Kmita says. "But, it's super important for me, we're not forcing people to play like there is a guy who is a support, or there is a tank and there is a healer. We don't want this. If people want to play the three DPS guys, go. If you want to play three distance guys, you can. Some strategies will be better, some will be not so cool, but we're not forcing anyone from a gameplay perspective that you have to play this way."

Because Outriders' multiplayer is a co-op only experience, the team has been able to prioritize the power fantasy. "Here, we can say this would be OP in a competitive PvP environment, but let's just go with it because it's fun and looks amazing and we can just go all the way with it," says game designer Łukasz Osiński. "I think this is one of the best parts of Outriders, is that you can enjoy it with your friends and everyone is going to have the feeling that their class is the most powerful. Why not. Go ahead."

We certainly felt powerful during our demo, but that doesn't mean it's easy. As you play and perform well, the world level increases in the background. The higher that level, the more difficult it becomes – and the better odds that high-end loot will drop from enemies. We battled a boss named Reiner (no relation), who is partially infused with anomalous powers, and while he was a challenge he didn't blow our minds. The team then increased the world level, and it was a significantly different experience.

Reiner's fire tornadoes do a ton of lingering damage, and it becomes more important to interrupt him during a healing phase, lest he regenerate what little health we are able to chip at. He also has a nasty habit of calling his friends to the yard. At first, we do the normal thing and destroy them as soon as they come into frame. After a few failed attempts, it's clear that we need to look at them as a potential health resource, albeit health resources that wield automatic weapons. Every class has its own healing mechanics that are tied to their general archetypes. My Devastator regenerates health when she's near enemies; when we wiped the goons out as soon as they appeared, I was missing out on a way to stay alive, as counterintuitive as it may sound. Eventually, we're able to manage both the boss and his minions effectively, and it ends with Reiner collapsing onto the ground – and dropping some pretty nice gear, to boot.

I ask Kmita about the encounter later, and he makes it clear that while we may have stumbled on something that works we won't be able to lean on that approach every time. "It's very tricky, because that strategy will work with that particular boss. But when you encounter the next boss, maybe that strategy will not work because the boss will buff the minions so you'll have to start working differently. Or the longer the fight goes, the minions will become more and more powerful. So you have to always adjust your strategy to the situation which is going on in the battlefield."



DEVASTATOR

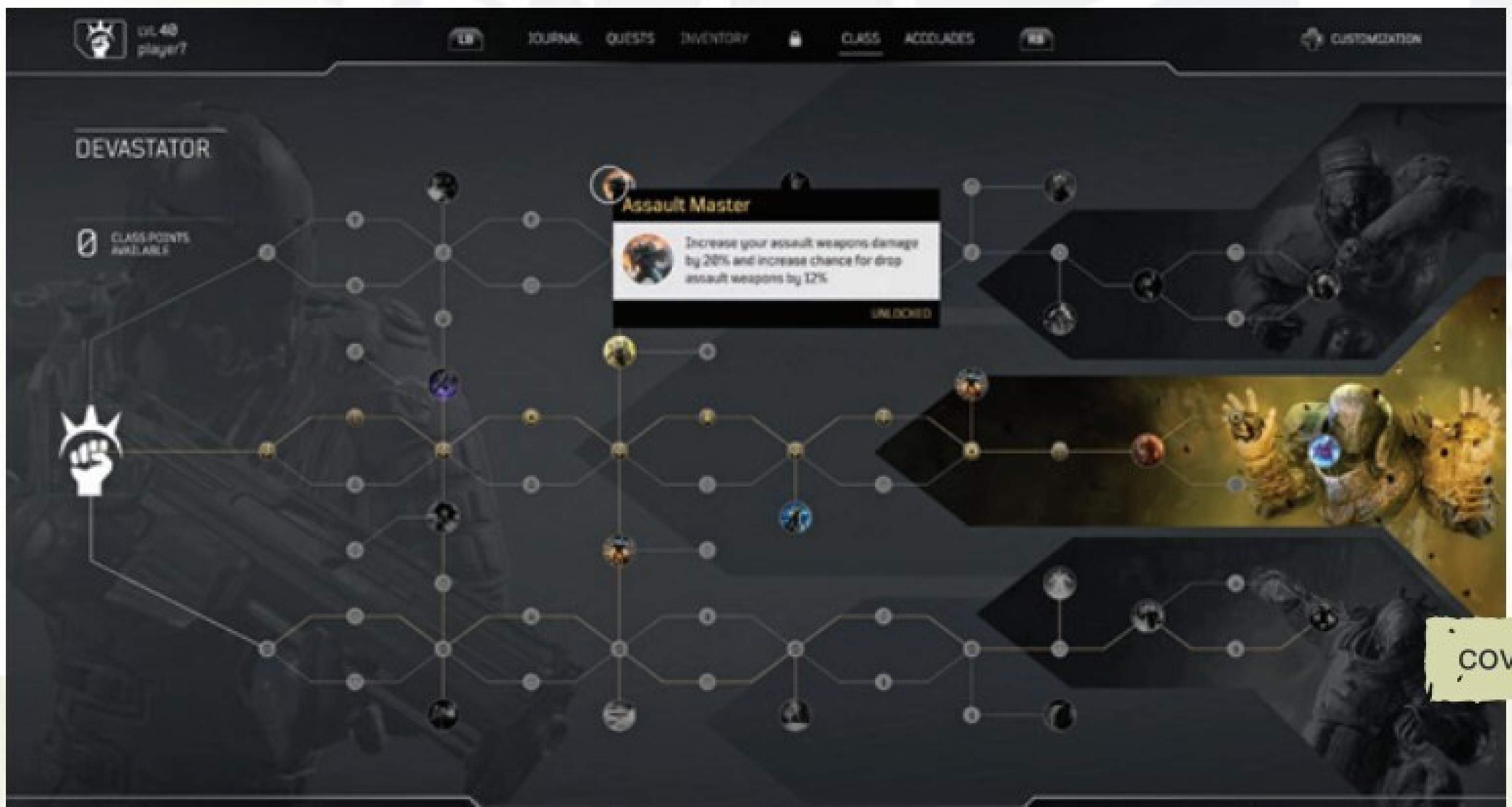
This tanky class is perfect for players who want to be rewarded for getting into the middle of it all

Subtlety goes out the window when the Devastator is around. These guys are all about getting in enemy faces and withstanding attacks that would lay other classes low. He's able to do this thanks to a variety of offensive and defensive skills that increase his overall survivability. "He doesn't have a sophisticated nature and doesn't like to play tricks like Trickster, but you can play 'Hulk smash!' and run up, so that might be a class for you," says game director Bartosz Kmita.

Reflect Bullets allows the Devastator to collect incoming projectiles, and then whip them back at attackers in a powerful reversal. His Golem form creates a protective temporary shell around him, mitigating damage. Enemies that are struck by Impale are, well, impaled by spikes. If they're killed while the debuff is in effect, they'll be hit by a massive spike from below the ground, turning them into a temporary healing totem for both the Devastator and any party members that happen to be around. Gravity Jump is a great way to get into the middle of a crowd. After selecting a target, players will then dive onto the victim, hitting with a heavy stomp. It's no coincidence that many of his special abilities are centered around closing the distance between enemies.

"When you are close to enemies, you will regain health," game director Bartosz Kmita says. "If you are playing him as a sniper, you can, but when you are low on health you'll have to figure out what to do."

FANTASY ANALOG: WARRIOR



Increase your assault weapons damage by 20% and increase chance for drop assault weapons by 12%

WEIRD WEAPONS

One of the many things that stands out about Outriders is that it's a sci-fi game perfumed with the smell of gunpowder. "Because the anomaly destroyed all the electronics and all the science-fiction elements from our world, we had to go with the kinetic, more realistic weapons," Kmita says. That self-imposed limitation means that players will have access to an arsenal based on 20th century firepower. You'll pick up guns with different status effects and stats (remember that explosive rifle during that initial landing?), but you aren't going to fire off any pew-pew laser blasters or anything like that.

"We didn't want to have laser weapons," says technical art director Krzysztof Dolas. "I don't know why they don't go well with us. We wanted to have this physical, kinetic power with the recoil clips. We wanted to have this feeling with the gunplay like you have this heavy weapon. Without this advanced technology, we wanted the weapons to be more interesting."

They're interesting all right. Thanks to the anomaly, some of the armor and higher-end guns begin to get reshaped into something strange. We couldn't get a read on what, exactly the anomaly is, but it has a nasty habit of twisting seemingly disparate elements together. Say a weapon is near a tree when it's hit – there's a good chance that it will become a fused hybrid of plant and rifle. It's still unmistakably a rifle, just one with vines and leaves woven within its form. Or one might look like something you'd craft in Monster Hunter, a bony tool of death with a jawbone near its barrel. Those are far from the strangest one we heard about during our visit.

"There's this gun that's covered with meat," says audio lead Marcin Czartyński. "We figured out that while you shoot, you can have a bacon-frying sound because when you shoot that gun it overheats and the meat that is all over the place starts to boil and fry." When it's not cooking, it apparently pulses as though it's alive.

The weapons can be strange, but the team is striving for a grounded feeling, as strange as that may seem. That extends to a unified look for gear. You can equip up to five

Skill trees are flexible enough that your version of a particular class can be wildly different from another player's

different pieces of armor (helmet, chest, gloves, pants, and boots), but you won't look like you're going to be booking a trip to Clown Town if you can't scrounge up a complete set of matching gear. "We don't want to have it so when you put all the elements that don't fit together you look like a Christmas tree," says art director Bartosz Bieluszko. "We have a lot of variety in these grounded elements, so they fit together even when you mess them up."

We weren't able to see any of it in action, but players will be able to craft and upgrade their items as they play, pulling desirable mods from weapons and putting them into others. "In most games, when you think about modifications you have to find some legendary items," Kmita says. "Of course we have legendary and super-rare items, but we have weapons with mods very early because we want this to be part of your core experience."

NEW HORIZONS WITH SOME OLD FRIENDS

Our demo is centered around Rift Town, which is one of the few settlements on Enoch. It's led, coincidentally enough, by a woman named Shira. She may have saved us 30 years ago, but she isn't particularly interested in a reunion. As the only remaining ECA officer, she's in charge of what's left of the failed colony. "She's transformed from this warm, bright-eyed optimistic young scientist and is now this bitter, cold, terrified leader of these people who is doing everything she can to protect, and is failing," Rubin says. "This is not a war that is going well, this is a war that they're about to lose."

She's been working with a man – or, perhaps more accurately, a being – named Seth, but the fate of her people isn't his priority. "Seth is an altered, like you, but he's clearly been doing it a lot longer. You can see that being altered pushes you past any sense of being human. The things that you can do, the way that you are worshipped by the soldiers and treated like a god on the battlefield, it's clear that this guy Seth is not driven to fight for any one side. He's got his own mission. He's got his own vision, that's up above the petty concerns of humanity." Seth also has a sense that there's something special about you. "He's someone who sees in you someone who has the potential for a mission to lead these people like a shepherd to a new home. Someplace new like the Outriders were supposed to do. He's very much someone who is terrifying at first but becomes a real mentor and a guide."

Rift Town's days are numbered. As one of the last Outriders, it's up to you to find a new hope for humanity – or at the very least, determine what is going on with that signal. That means leading a crew of people willing to risk their lives and see what's beyond the valley. You'll embark on that journey with your truck, as part of a convoy of NPCs you meet along the way, and your fellow players.

"The truck is our personal space, and it will travel through the map," Kmita says. "You can't drive it – you're the boss here, so you have your own driver – but this is your home so you can customize it, you can upgrade this truck, you can use some tools in this truck like the crafting or the chest where you can store your equipment."

You'll also be able to show off your exploits with trophies and other decorations earned during battle. "It's a small nod to how I experienced this when I was playing Diablo II, when someone would join in your game and you'd see his stuff, and you'd say, 'Oh f---, how did you manage to get this?" Dolas says. "You could show off how dedicated you were to the game. We wanted to incorporate something like that in your outfit or your truck and show off that you're into it."

Kmita jumps in to make it clear that this isn't going to be a place for monetization, either. "We don't want to incorporate any pay-to-win elements or a shop where you can buy everything even if you're not playing the game. That's what's crucial for us. If you have some specific armor or a thing to show off, you earned it."

People Can Fly's earlier games had an over-the-top flair, but Outriders reflects the fact that many members of the team have been making games together for more than 15 years. "We were more crazy – I don't want to use the word childish – but here we tried to be a little less crazy," Kmita says. "Of course, you can't escape from yourself, so … [laughs] But we're older, and we're trying to capture maybe more of a mature tone." There are moments of levity, to be sure, but you're not going to be kicking people into cactuses and finishing them off with groin shots.

That doesn't mean that they're not having a lot of fun building Outriders. During our visit, it's tough not to get caught up in the excitement that the team is feeling over their work. They're effusive about the games that they've played in the past, which have clearly served as beacons for how (and how not to) incorporate loot and RPG elements into their game in a meaningful way. And they're also eager to share what they've made with the rest of the world – and with themselves.

"We're missing this game," Dolas says, simply. "I would want to play this, which is why I want to make it." ◆

Visit gameinformer.com/outriders for exclusive videos – including our rapid-fire interview – features, and more

WHO KNEW HELL ON EARTH

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • Stadia • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Shooter
(3-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

» DEVELOPER
id Software

» RELEASE
March 20

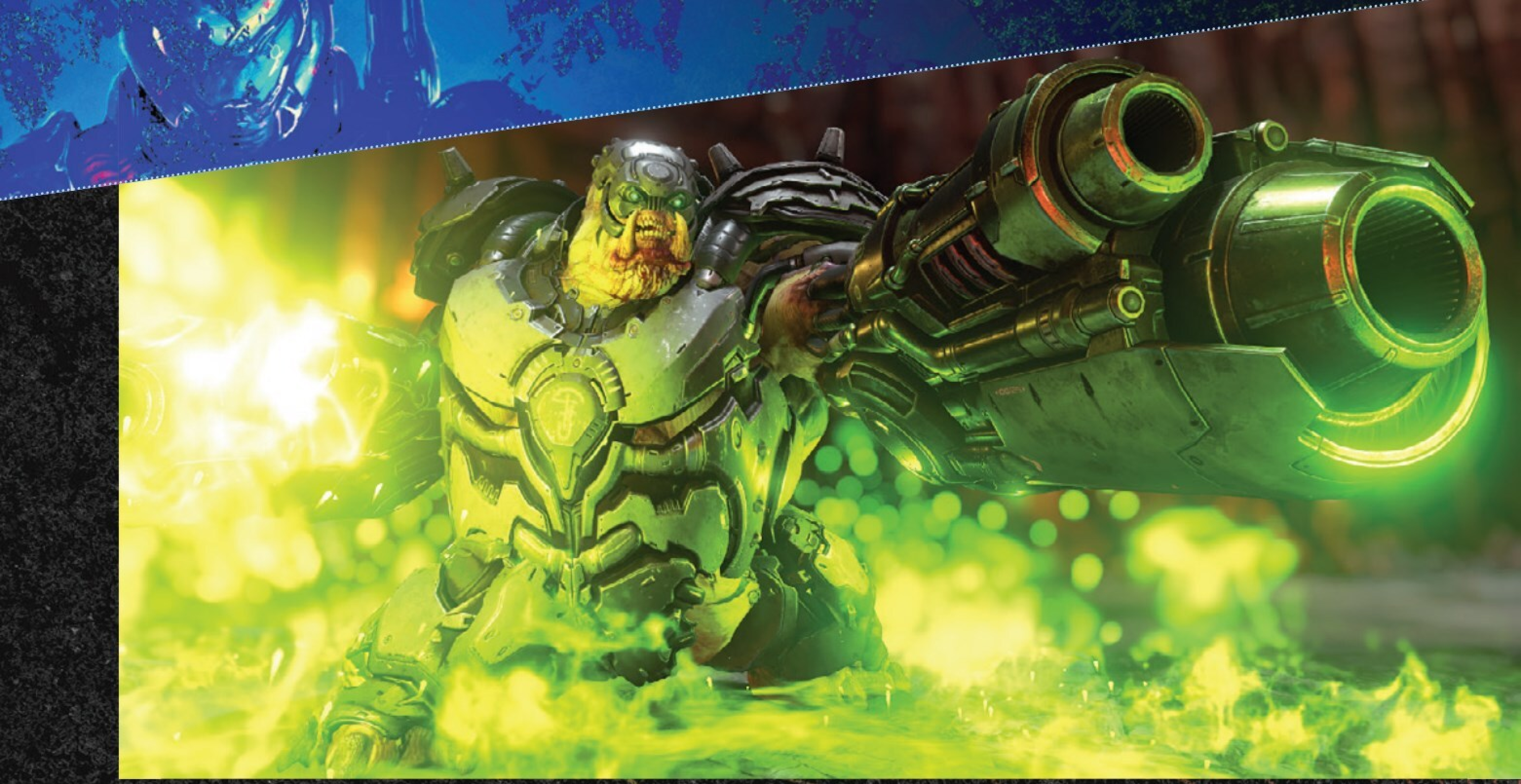
HANDS-ON WITH THE FIRST THREE HOURS OF

DOOM ETERNAL

WAS THIS MUCH FUN

BY BEN REEVES

An SOS crackles over the radio from a military outpost somewhere on Earth. But it's too late; the facility is already being overwhelmed by horned beasts from the deepest pits of the abyss. Our once blue planet has become a lake of fire. Worse still, a mysterious interdimensional entity has offered everyone on it as a sacrifice to the demons of hell. This cannot stand. You load your shotgun and charge forward into a sea of mindless monstrosities. You are the Doom Slayer. You are vengeance incarnate. And before this day is done, hell will learn that you are the real monster in this fight.



NEW AND IMPROVED SLAYING

During the events of Doom (2016) players traveled between a UAC facility on Mars and the dimension of hell, leaving a trail of demonic bodies in their wake. By the end of the game, the Doom Slayer had sealed the last portal to hell and buried his last demon. The galaxy was safe. For a time. But two years have passed since those events and the events of Doom Eternal, and the demonic threat has once again returned – this time bigger and badder than ever.

"Obviously, something has gone wrong," says creative director Hugo Martin. "The Doom Slayer is back to clean up the mess. At the end of Doom (2016), [antagonist Samuel Hayden] makes a comment indicating that he knows you'll be back, like you always come back. You're like this force of nature, and you show up whenever things go wrong. But this time the story has evolved a little bit, and you'll get to see how we're fleshing out more of the Doom universe."

With Doom Eternal, id Software is aiming for a tone that falls somewhere between heavy-metal album covers and Saturday-morning cartoons like *He-Man*. That tone is apparent as soon as I drop into my first mission on Earth and watch a 10-story behemoth march through a river of lava before chainsawing my way through a wave of flesh-hungry imps. Within a half-hour, I'm jumping off the head of a Cacodemon and laughing at the cartoonish sound its eye makes as I rip it from its socket. Doom Eternal is gory, but it revels in its absurdity.

Just like the 2016 revival, Eternal's core combat loop is incredibly satisfying. The Doom Slayer is strongest when he's constantly moving. Taking cover is for fools and reloading your weapon is unnecessary. Instead, id has finely tuned your ammo reserves so you are encouraged to constantly rotate your weapons during a firefight. When things get desperate, you can take a chainsaw to an enemy for an instant kill and watch them spit out ammo like a demonic piñata. Additionally, just before each enemy dies, they enter a stagger state and glow orange. This is your cue to run up and take them out with a physical glory kill that rewards you with extra health. It's a tightly designed combat system, and each encounter feels like a deadly dance as you race across the battlefield.

"Forcing the player into other weapons was a big part of combat," says executive producer Marty Stratton. "It comes down to making the weapons effective for specific roles. Enemies have weak points. For example, sticky bombs blow the turret off of the top of the Arachnotron, or you can shoot a grenade into a Cacodemons' mouth to instantly stagger them. Something like that gives you a specific purpose for each gun to make a meaningful difference in battle."

Doom Eternal adds a few new wrinkles to its core combat loop. The first is called blood punch. This one is simple; it is a super-powerful physical attack that can wipe out groups of smaller enemies with a single blow. The attack slowly charges up as you dole out physical damage. The second addition is called the flame belcher. This shoulder-mounted flamethrower also slowly recharges over time and it helps refill your armor. After corralling several imps in the center of an arena, I hit them with the flame belcher, setting them all ablaze. Enemies that are on fire take damage over time, but they also continually spit out armor pickups. I quickly discover that liberal use of the flame belcher is another great way to bolster your health reserves in battle.

"It's a skill to learn to play Doom," says Martin. "By the third act you'll have really mastered it, and then you get to expand and be creative and do all kinds of crazy stuff. But, in the beginning, it should feel a little too fast. It should feel like there are a few too many things, and you're making a lot of bad decisions, and it's a little overwhelming. Otherwise, there wouldn't be anything to master. We're comfortable frustrating and overwhelming the player in the beginning, because we're confident that if they stick with it, they'll eventually master the skills required to become the Doom Slayer."

CLIMBING OUT OF HELL

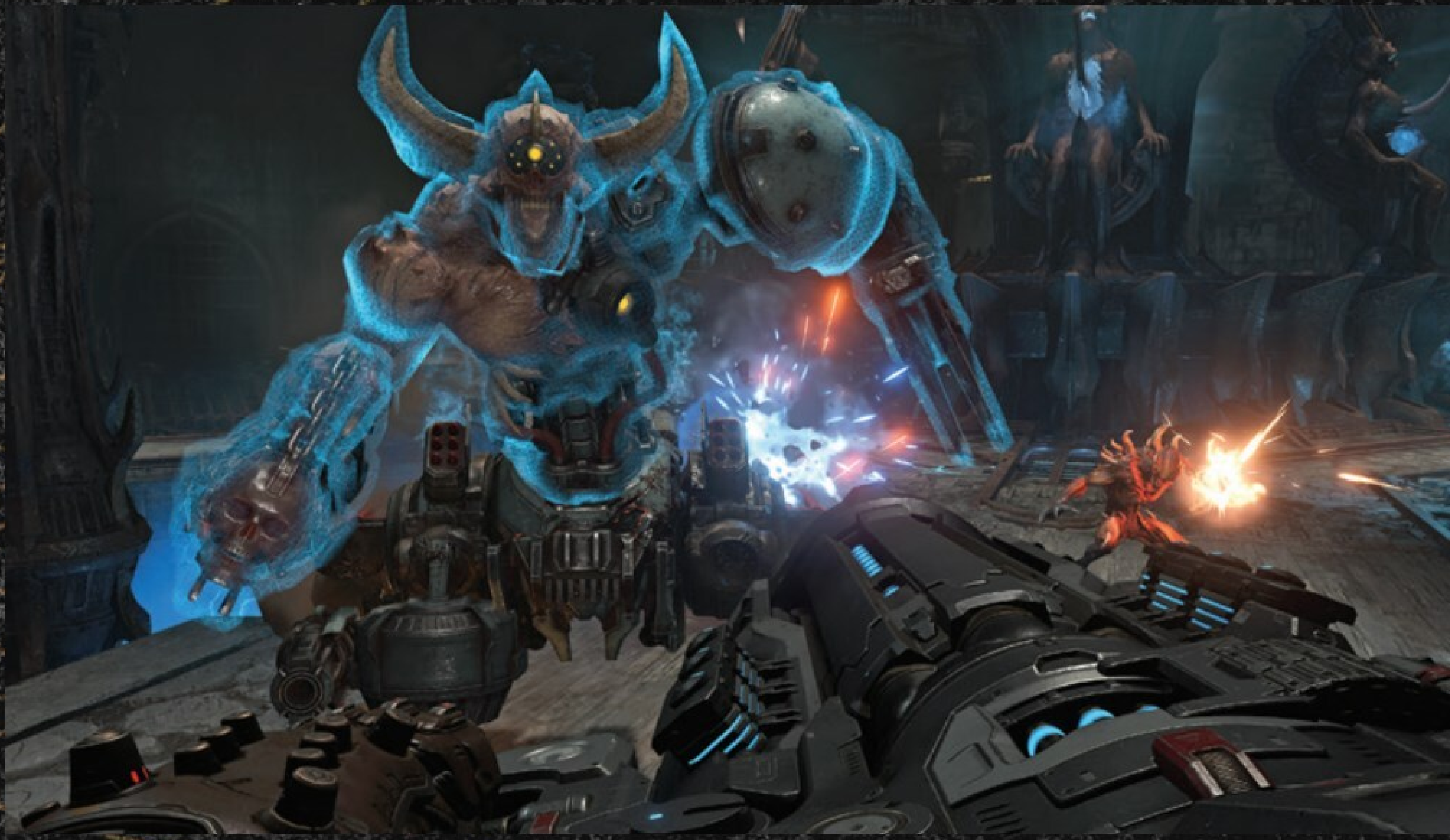
One of the biggest changes for Doom Eternal is the Slayer's new suite of traversal mechanics. Doom (2016) put a big focus on mobility, but Eternal boosts your mobility options to a greater degree. One of the most versatile new tools is a dash, which can be used twice in a row. The dash is a great way to close the gap between foes or cover extra "ground" while in the air. The Doom Slayer can also now swing across monkey bars, climb designated walls, and use a grappling hook that is attached to the redesigned super shotgun, which lets him instantly zip toward enemies.

The Super Shotgun's meat hook is a good example of Eternal's revamped weapons mods, which return from Doom (2016). Doom Eternal offers more ways than ever to upgrade your gear. For example, sentinel crystals are pickups that are scattered across each level, and these items can be used to permanently upgrade things like your health, armor, and ammo storage. Runes are a completely separate set of collectibles that augment your abilities, granting you techniques that let you slow time in midair or perform faster glory kills. I used a rune to unlock a passive skill that automatically slowed time whenever I was about to die, which saved my skin more than once. Finally, Praetor Suit points further enhance existing abilities and reveal special items on the minimap, let you switch weapons faster, or give you immunity to explosive barrels.

To further complicate matters, each level has a set of optional mini challenges. For example, you might be tasked with killing a certain number of enemies with a specific weapon or told to perform a specific number of glory kills. Completing these challenges earns you experience, which in turn awards more Praetor Suit points. There are so many ways to upgrade your gear that I was a little overwhelmed at first, but I was happy to see my toolset continually expand and excited to unlock every new move. Above all, these upgrades serve to give you a wider toolset for overcoming Doom's intense combat encounters.

"When you go all the way back and look at the past 25 years of Doom, there's a real consistency to it," says Stratton. "That's something that we focused on in 2016 and again in Eternal. Those original games were made out of pure fun and joy. It was for the fun of playing a game with no other agenda. We get to do that with triple-A budgets, the best technology in the world, and creative talent that is at the top of the industry. The fact that we get to go to work and make an outlandish, super fun game at that level is a dream come true."

Based on the first few hours alone, Doom Eternal could be a dream come true for fans as well. Eternal's action is more intense, and the combat strategy is deeper than any previous Doom game to date. When the demons come crawling out of the woodwork this March, the Doom Slayer will be waiting for them, because as long as there is evil in the universe there will be a Doom guy running toward it, ready to shoot it in the face with a shotgun. ◆



EVERYTHING WE KNOW ABOUT FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

» **Platform** PS4

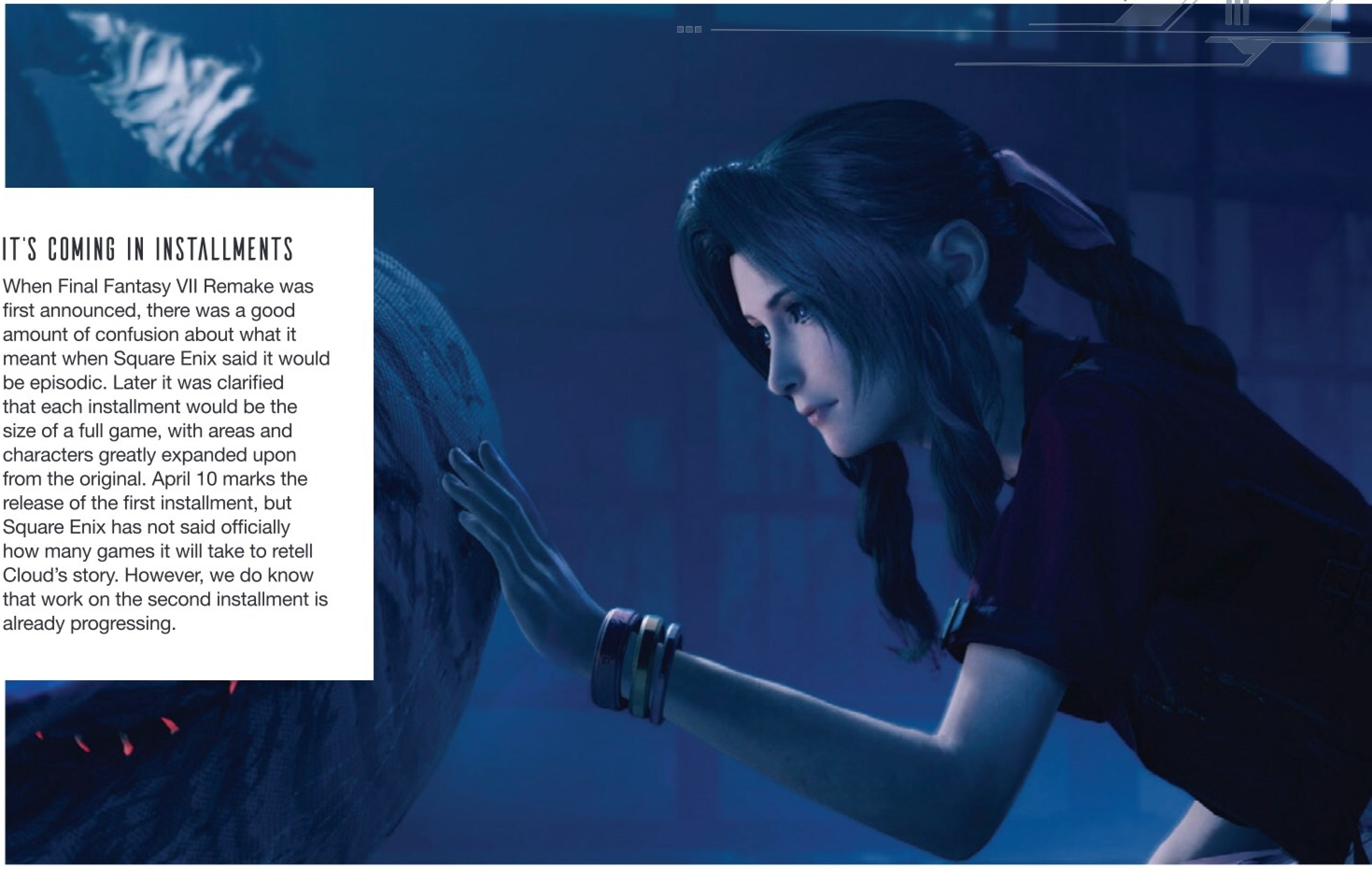
» **Style** 1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher** Square Enix

» **Developer** Square Enix

» **Release** April 10

Final Fantasy VII remains one of the most beloved entries in the series, and for good reason. It helped establish modern cinematic storytelling in games and was one of the first big 3D RPGs. Beyond that, it not only gave us the ever-popular Cloud Strife and his iconic Buster Sword, but also a top-tier villain in Sephiroth, who was just as menacing as he was fascinating. Over 20 years later, the game's legacy hasn't faded, even if some of its mechanics and graphics haven't aged well. Now Square Enix is remaking the revered entry, bringing new excitement to Final Fantasy VII and its possibilities on today's hardware. As we inch our way to an April 10 launch for the first installment of the multi-part game, we decided to compile everything we know about Final Fantasy VII Remake. The project has remained very secretive, but here's an easy way to catch up on one of the most anticipated games of 2020.



IT'S COMING IN INSTALLMENTS

When Final Fantasy VII Remake was first announced, there was a good amount of confusion about what it meant when Square Enix said it would be episodic. Later it was clarified that each installment would be the size of a full game, with areas and characters greatly expanded upon from the original. April 10 marks the release of the first installment, but Square Enix has not said officially how many games it will take to retell Cloud's story. However, we do know that work on the second installment is already progressing.

IT'S NOT A ONE-TO-ONE RECREATION OF THE ORIGINAL

The remake isn't just about better graphics, although you can expect that. Everything is being rebuilt from the ground up and Square Enix is taking this opportunity to reimagine and modernize the story. Both producer Yoshinori Kitase and director Tetsuya Nomura said in various interviews that they didn't want the remake to be merely nostalgic; they also wanted to try new things to not only surprise newcomers but also longtime fans.

Final Fantasy VII Remake is being billed as having an emphasis on cinematic storytelling. This opens the door for new characters and adding more backstory and personality to others we meet. In a Square Enix post, Nomura shed some light on just how big this will be. "With regard to new characters, of whom I said during past interviews that there would be 'none' – though they aren't main characters, their numbers ended up growing considerably in the process of creating a rich depiction of Midgar," he said. "When you think of Midgar's final boss, you probably think of the M.O.T.O.R., but in this game, new bosses will appear and add to the excitement of the story even more."

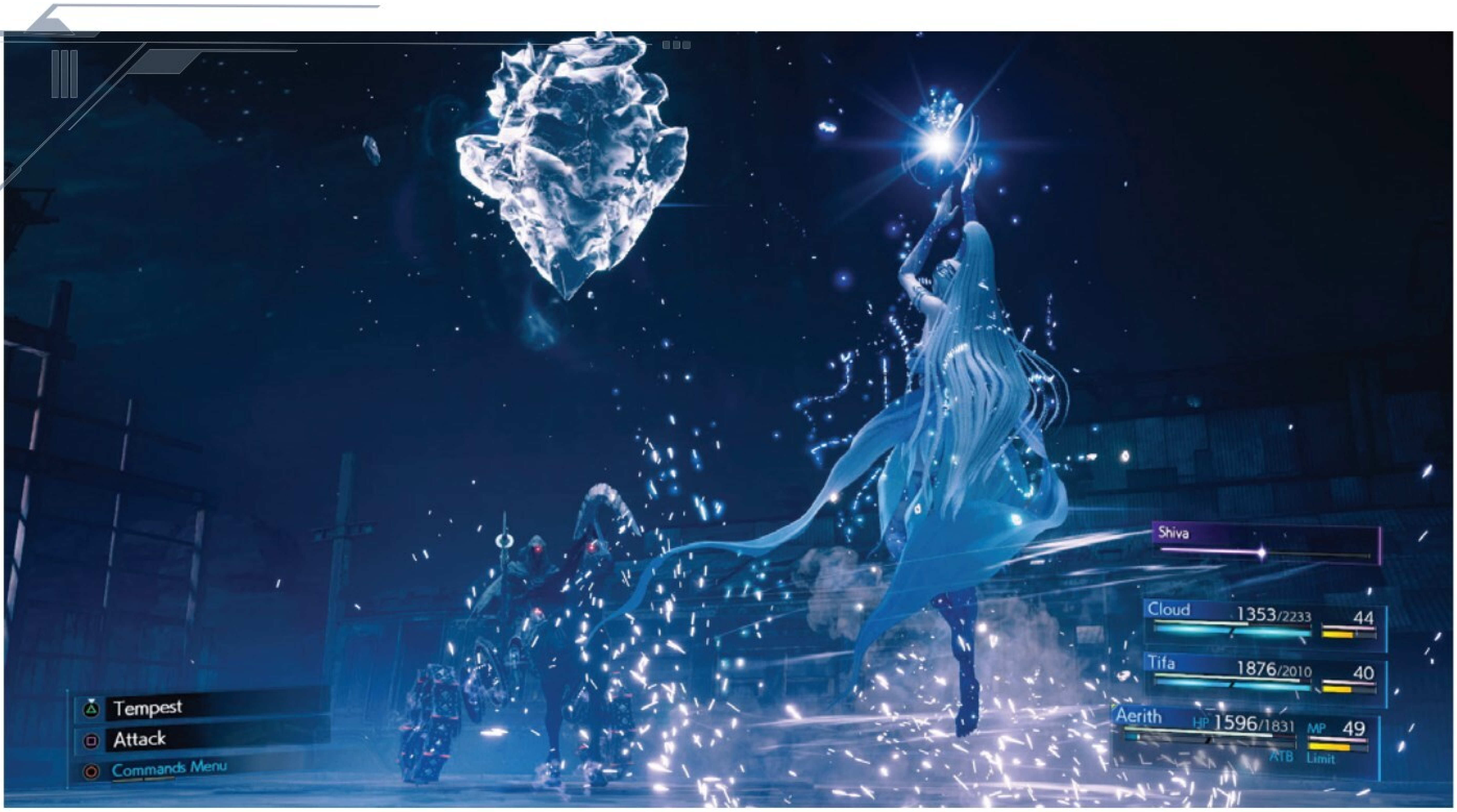
Square said there will be more story sequences and character interactions, which we saw firsthand in a recent leaked demo. Jessie and Biggs saw more screen time and personality, with them joking about Cloud's standoffishness and Jessie referring to him as a "joy to look at." The dialogue sounded much more natural and had more substance. Making characters more multi-dimensional should also open up room for the Turks, like Reno, Rude, and Tseng, to get more spotlight.

MIDGAR IS THE FIRST GAME'S FOCUS

Speaking of Midgar, it is a vast, technologically advanced city and one of the most iconic locations of Final Fantasy VII. It's where you spent your first few hours learning about the characters and the world, fighting a slew of baddies, doing crazy minigames like the squatting iron challenge, and finding Cloud his perfect dress, which is confirmed to still be in the game. The team behind the game considers it the location that's most representative of Final Fantasy VII. Therefore, the first part of the multi-game remake focuses on the events that took place here.

In the original game you spent around five hours completing this section, so this will be a significant bump in content and scope. "The first game in this project expands on the story of Midgar, and is such an elaborate retelling that it has become a solid standalone game in its own right," Kitase told us at this past E3, confirming it would span over two Blu-ray discs of content.

Midgar represents the greed of capitalism with the Shrina Building dominating the cityscape, while showing the toll this takes on the less fortunate in the poverty-stricken and boarded-up slums. It houses many memorable locales in its nine sectors such as the Sector 7 slums, Wall Market, and the Shinra Building, giving the developers plenty of options for places to expand. Honestly, seeing how Square Enix reimagines its red-light-district-like Wall Market should be a treat. From the bright lights to the bars to the Honey-Bee Inn, anything is possible. And co-director Motomu Toriyama already teased as much in a Square Enix blog post: "Additionally, when remaking the Honey-Bee Inn at the Wall Market, we revived it as a pantheon of entertainment, which couldn't be realized back then."



THE COMBAT IS MORE ACTION-ORIENTED

All the footage we've seen shows that Square Enix is going all in on the action, with big explosions and intense motorcycle battles. Combat is no exception. The original used the quasi-turn-based ATB gauge; however, Final Fantasy VII Remake is a hybrid of real-time and command-based combat.

There are no random battles this time around, as enemies are visible. Fighting is triggered by approaching them or by cutscenes. You directly control one party member and execute simple attacks with the press of a button. You also have options to block or dodge, which seem pretty integral to battle, as missing a few can have deadly consequences.

The other vital part of battle is the ATB (Active Time Battle) gauge. This fills up during battle, and once charged, you can expend charges to use battle commands, such as items, spells, and special abilities like Cloud's Braver. The ATB gauge recharges over time, charges can be used immediately or saved, and the bar fills up faster by landing attacks. Also by doing the latter, you build up your focus meter, which, when full, can stagger foes, causing them to take increased damage. (Note: Dodging, evading, and standard attacks are not tied to your ATB, so you can see them freely.) Also, some changes were made to special attacks versus limit breaks. For instance, Cloud's Braver attack is just a regular ability now, but Cross Slash is still a limit break. To make easier use of abilities and items, you can assign commands to shortcuts, very reminiscent of Kingdom Hearts.

While you can only control one party member at a time, using the d-pad, you can swap between characters, which is bound to come in handy. From what we've seen so far, Cloud uses close-ranged slashes, Tifa excels at up-close melee, Barrett is a good ranged option for shooting enemies, and Aerith is more effective at range, primarily using magic attacks. All characters also have their own unique abilities. Cloud, for instance, can switch stances, allowing him to enter into "operator mode" (normal speed and damage) or "punisher mode" (slower speed, higher damage). With punisher mode, Cloud also can counterblow every time he successfully guards against an enemy's melee attack.

In addition to your powers on the battlefield, weapons can also be enhanced to help you get the job done. You can upgrade a weapon's power or Materia slots. Every weapon has its own unique abilities, and the more you use a specific one, the more you can increase the proficiency. If you max this out, you then learn the ability and can equip it on any weapon you choose.

If this all seems daunting and fast-paced, twitchy action isn't your thing, you can experience something closer to the original's turn-based battle system in classic mode. Characters and enemies still move and attack in real-time, but here you direct more of the action than being right in it. In this mode, your party members attack automatically while you watch their ATB gauge charge, then you can step in and select what to use the ATB charges on: items, magic, or abilities. You can swap in and out of this mode at anytime.

THE VOICE CAST

Square Enix has enlisted some top-tier voice talent for Final Fantasy VII Remake. Some notable changes include Steve Burton and George Newbern (who have voiced Cloud and Sephiroth respectively since *Advent Children*) not reprising their roles. Square Enix said it wanted a new generation of voice actors to engage new and old fans alike. Here's the complete list of the cast and where you might recognize them from.

- **Cloud**, voiced by Cody Christian (*All American*, *Teen Wolf*)
- **Sephiroth**, voiced by Tyler Hoechlin (*Supergirl*, *Teen Wolf*)
- **Barret**, voiced by John Eric Bentley (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, *Independence Day: Resurgence*)
- **Aerith**, voiced by Briana White (*Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders*, *Occupants*)
- **Tifa**, voiced by Britt Baron (*GLOW*)
- **Jessie**, voiced by Erica Lindbeck (Spider-Man, Persona 5, *ThunderCats Roar*)
- **Biggs**, voiced by Gideon Emery (*Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, *Teen Wolf*)
- **Wedge**, voiced by Matt Jones (*Breaking Bad*)

CHANGES FOR SUMMONS AND MATERIA

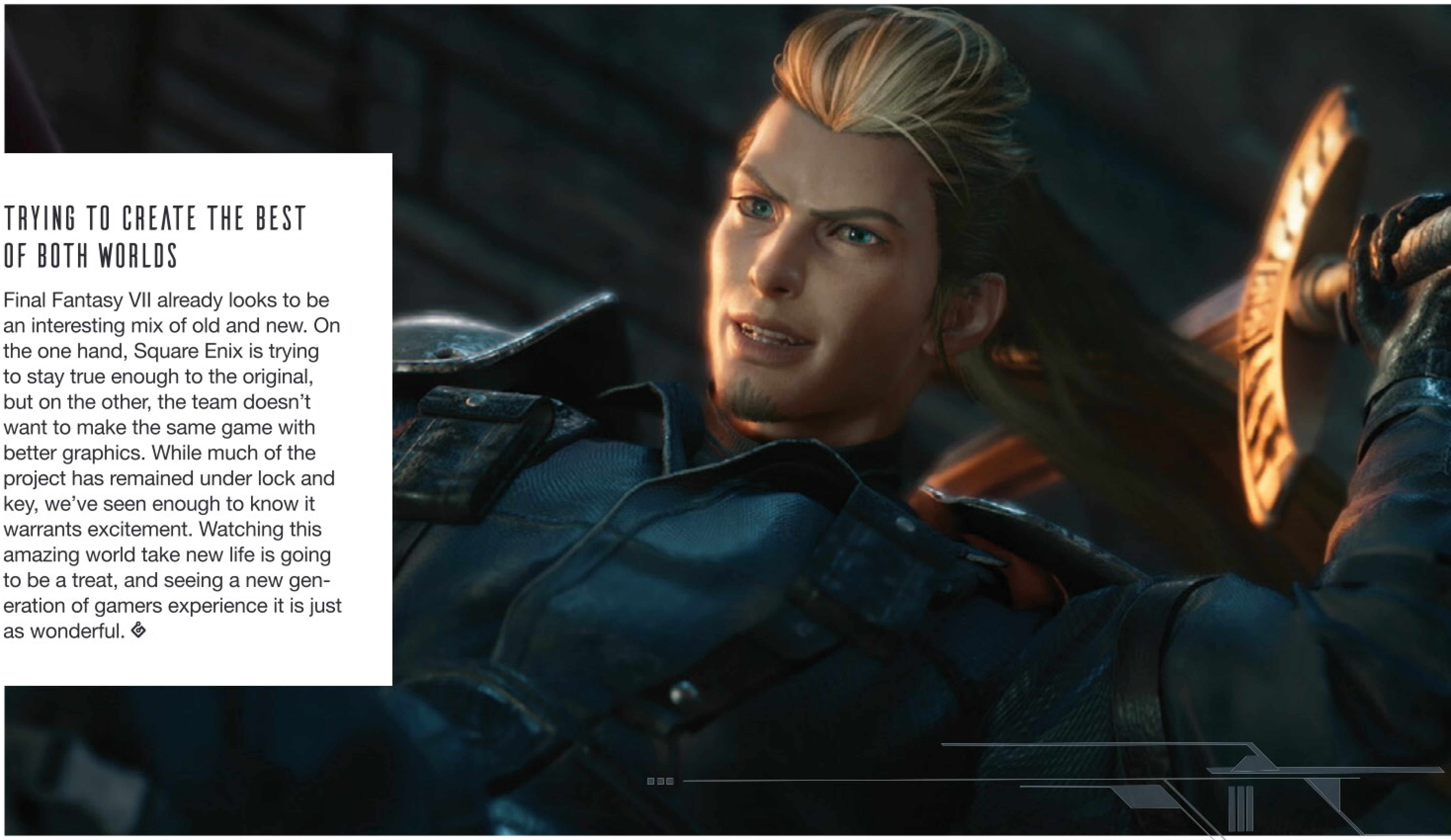
Summons have always been about the spectacle, and that's not changing. However, due to the first game being set in Midgar, they are being introduced sooner, and now summons don't just come in for an elaborate, one-off attack. Rather, they stay on the battlefield as active participants, and you can only equip one at a time. This requires you to strategize which summons you take into situations. You can issue commands to your summons, otherwise they'll just act independently.

Summons can only be used once you fill a meter, and once the summon gauge hits zero, your creature leaves the battlefield, but not before unleashing a final, big attack. For instance, Square Enix has shown footage of Ifrit executing its signature Hellfire attack. And yes, the Chocobo & Moogle summon is in the game, complete with its special stampede move, where a herd of chocobos mows down an enemy.

While the Materia system is very similar, it is getting some new tweaks. Materia, magical gems, are still slotted into equipment for perks and spells, and it's even visible on character's weapons now. However, Nomura confirmed in an interview with *Famitsu* that not every piece will make it, and some new ones will be introduced.

TRYING TO CREATE THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Final Fantasy VII already looks to be an interesting mix of old and new. On the one hand, Square Enix is trying to stay true enough to the original, but on the other, the team doesn't want to make the same game with better graphics. While much of the project has remained under lock and key, we've seen enough to know it warrants excitement. Watching this amazing world take new life is going to be a treat, and seeing a new generation of gamers experience it is just as wonderful. ◆



AN EXPANDING WORLD

Pokémon Sword & Shield give you two new adventures to embark on

BY BRIAN SHEA

» **PLATFORM** Switch » **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) » **PUBLISHER** Nintendo, The Pokémon Company
» **DEVELOPER** Game Freak » **RELEASE** June (The Isle of Armor), Fall (The Crown Tundra)

Following the runaway success of Pokémon Sword & Shield last year, which became the fastest-selling Switch title yet, as well as the highest-grossing entry in the long-running Pokémon franchise, many trainers are looking for new adventures and new ways to enjoy the latest games in the series. In the past, players have seen additions and refinements to Pokémon games through the release of a third game sometimes years after the original games' release. For Sword & Shield, which are the first-ever all-new Pokémon RPGs on a console, Game Freak is changing things up, delivering new content in multiple parts – and way sooner – by way of an Expansion Pass.

SEARCHING FAR AND WIDE

The Pokémon Sword & Shield Expansion Pass gives players access to two new downloadable content expansions: The Isle of Armor and The Crown Tundra. Each piece of content brings new areas to explore, new Pokémon to catch and battle, new clothes to equip to your trainer, and even new features thanks to items like the Exp. Charm and new tutor moves that add previously unseen wrinkles in a mainline Pokémon game.

While each expansion has its own Pokédex to complete, you can bring those Pokémon back to Galar, expanding the Galar Pokédex as well. This means that thanks to these expansions, more all-new and returning Pokémon are coming to Sword & Shield, helping to remedy one of the biggest complaints within the community.

All players will receive a free update to coincide with the launches of these expansions to enable them to receive these added Pokémon through means such as trading or the Pokémon Home cloud service. Pokémon Home also lets players bring Pokémon forward from previous games as long as they appear in these expansions or the base game.

A SUMMER ISLAND GETAWAY

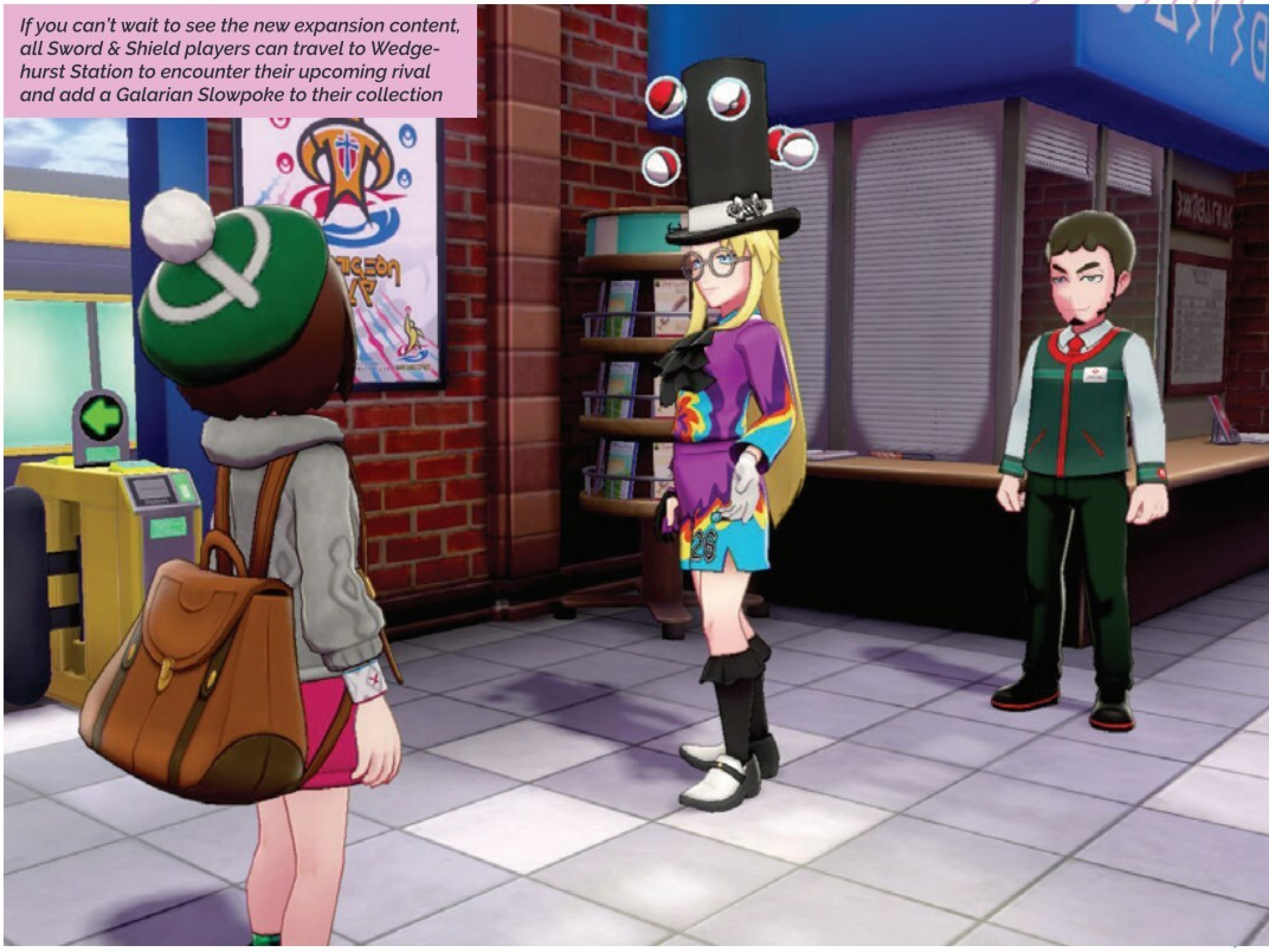
The first expansion, Isle of Armor, takes players to a giant island full of beaches, forests, bogs, caves, and sand dunes to traverse and battle on. With so many biomes unlike those in Sword & Shield, the isle is home to several Pokémon who aren't present in the base games. While exploring the island, you take up an apprenticeship under a legendary trainer from the Galar region named Mustard. Mustard was the reigning Galar champion for 18 consecutive years and served as mentor to champion Leon.

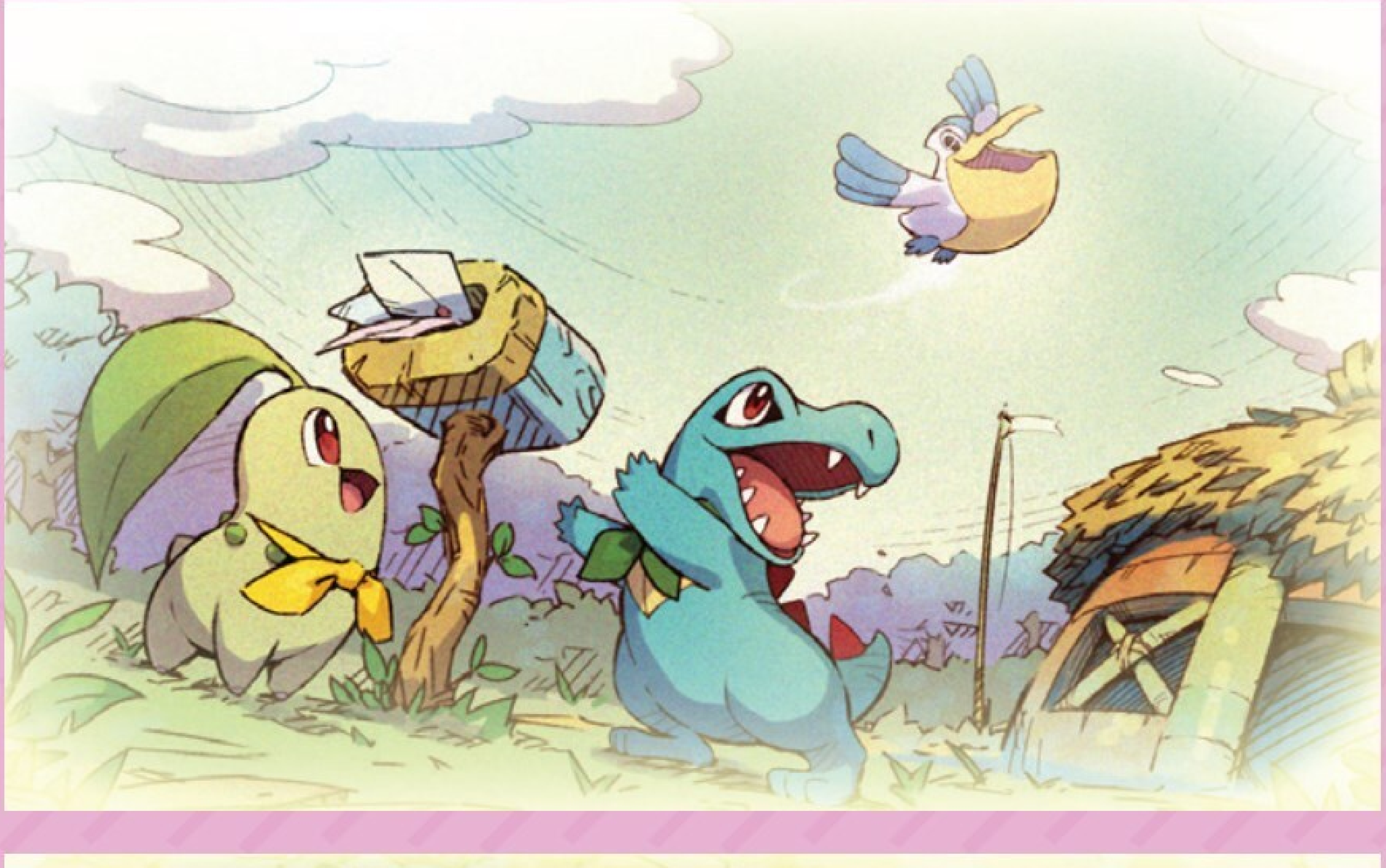
While at Mustard's dojo you meet a new rival; Sword players encounter Klara, a poison-type trainer who strives to be cute and popular, but whose smile hides a calculating nature that makes her formidable in battles. Meanwhile, Shield players meet Avery, a psychic-type trainer with a prideful, but gentlemanly demeanor. Both characters hope some of Mustard's magic rubs off on them so they can become better trainers like Leon before them. While in the dojo, you'll even learn about and take part in a new type of battling: Restricted Sparring, where trainers can only use certain Pokémon or must battle under certain conditions.

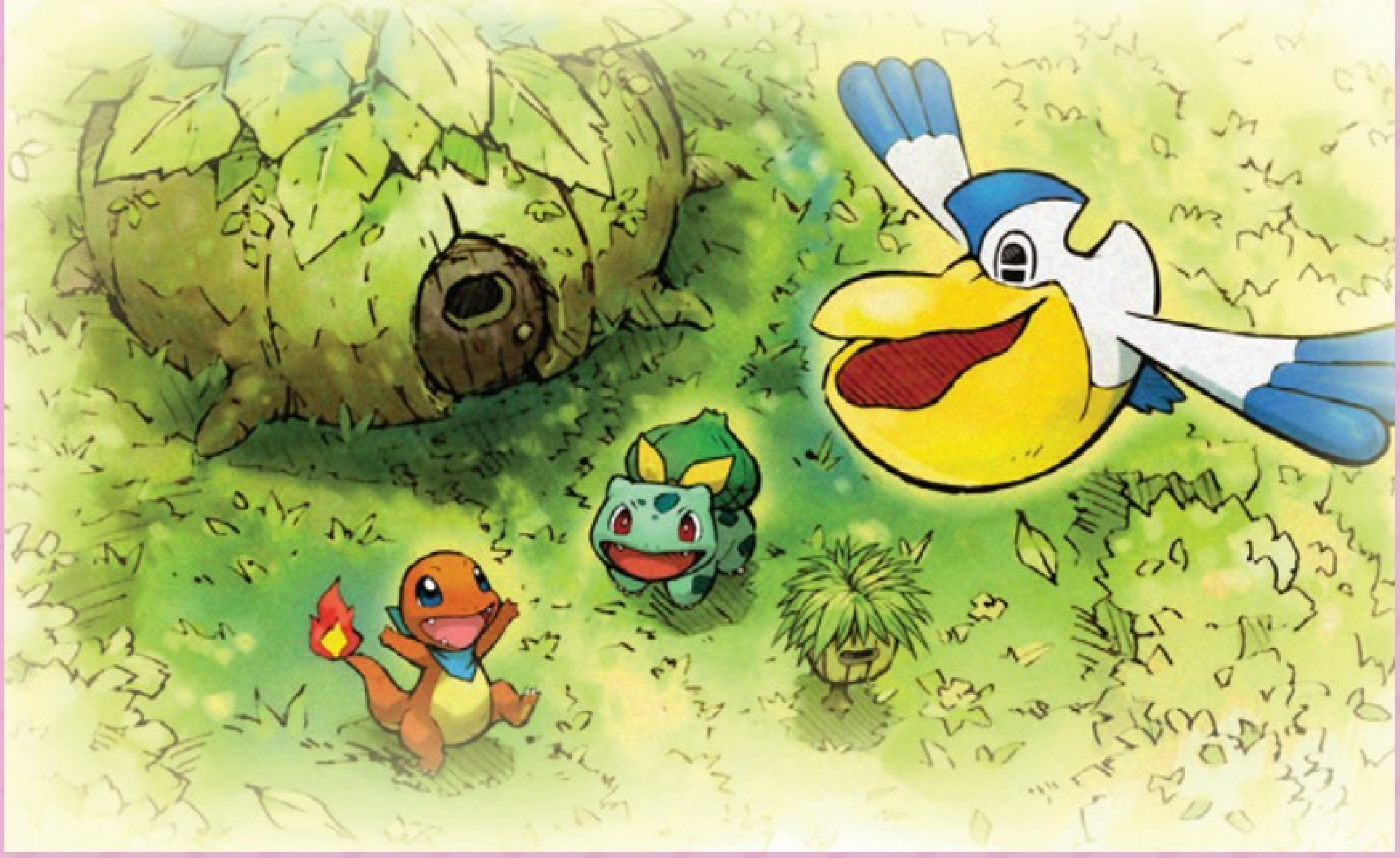
While you're exploring the Isle of Armor, you encounter both new and returning Pokémon. In addition to the return of creatures like Chansey, Lycanroc, Kingdra, and Magnezone, trainers also have the opportunity to encounter a new Legendary Pokémon. Kubfu is a fighting-type Pokémon that lived in the Galar region long ago before retreating from the region. After enough training, Kubfu evolves into Urshifu, which has two forms. Urshifu's Single Strike Form is a fighting and dark-type Pokémon more focused on power, while its Rapid Strike Form is fighting and water-type with an emphasis on evasiveness and flowing movements. Both of Urshifu's forms are able to Gigantamax.

Additionally, the Isle of Armor expansion brings new Gigantamax forms of the Galar region starter Pokémon. This means you can gain the ability to see massive new transformations of Rillaboom, Cinderace, and Inteleon through the first of the two announced expansions. If that's not enough, we will also see the introduction of more classic starters' Gigantamax as Venusaur and Blastoise get their long-overdue transformations.

If you can't wait to see the new expansion content, all Sword & Shield players can travel to Wedgehurst Station to encounter their upcoming rival and add a Galarian Slowpoke to their collection







A MYSTERY RESURFACES

Alongside the announcement of the Pokémon Sword & Shield Expansion Passes, The Pokémon Company also revealed that Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team is getting an enhanced port for Switch. Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team DX adds updated visuals and new features to Red Rescue Team and Blue Rescue Team (which released on Game Boy Advance and DS, respectively) to give the 2006 spin-off titles new life.

Taking place in a world where only Pokémon exist, your character awakens to discover they've transformed into one of 16 Pokémon you choose from at the start of the game. You band together with a group of other Pokémon to rescue innocent creatures from unexplained natural disasters that have begun occurring all over the world. Over the course of the adventure, you level up through experience gained during jobs, and find items like seeds, berries, and TMs to help them on their missions.

This enhanced version combines features found in both Red Rescue Team and Blue Rescue Team and adds several other components to modernize the experience and make it more approachable. Auto mode automatically moves your team through the world in an efficient manner, while you can enable automatic attacks with the push of the A button. Additionally, up to eight Pokémon can travel together, and if a player faints in a dungeon, they can either ask other players to rescue them or use one of their own rescue teams to save them and resume from where they were defeated.

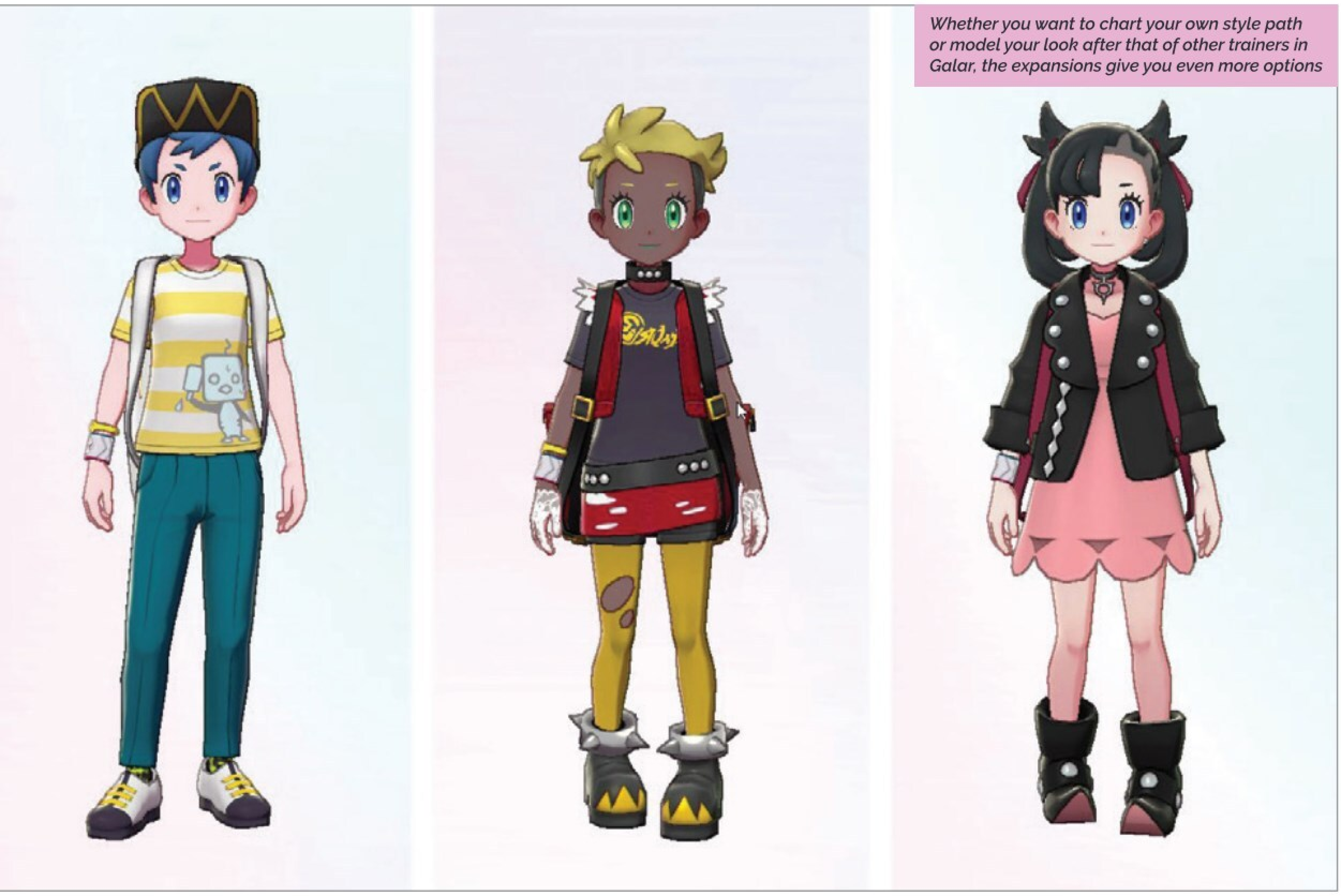
If you're unsure of whether this different style of Pokémon game is for you, a demo is currently available on the Switch eShop, with progress carrying over into the main game, which hits on March 6.

A Frozen Expedition

As the leaves begin to turn colors and the colder weather begins in the real world, players can get a sneak peek of the encroaching winter by journeying to the Crown Tundra. Here, trainers explore a beautiful, mountainous region covered in snow. During this adventure, you're appointed the leader of an exploration team tasked with investigating the farthest corners of the frozen area.

Just like the Isle of Armor, the Crown Tundra gives you several familiar faces to encounter and catch. From Nidorino and Beldum to Garchomp and Elekid, even more fan favorites return in the second expansion. This content drop also introduces another new Legendary Pokémon in the psychic and grass-type Calyrex. Less is known about this Pokémon than is known about Kubfu and Urshifu, but it is said to have ruled Galar in ancient times. Called "The King Pokémon," legend has it Calyrex has witnessed everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen in the future.

In the Galar region's Wild Area, Pokémon Dens are seen from the outside as locations where you gather to participate in Max Raid Battles, but that's the extent of what players see of them. In the Crown Tundra, part of your expedition takes you inside of these dens. In these dens, players can battle versions of Legendary Pokémon from past games, as well as other Pokémon



Whether you want to chart your own style path or model your look after that of other trainers in Galar, the expansions give you even more options

not found in Galar's Wild Area. In the Crown Tundra, we see the return of Regirock, Regice, and Registeel from the Gen III games, as well as new forms of Articuno, Zapdos, and Moltres from the first-gen titles. You can even invite players who do not own the expansions to battle alongside you in these raids.

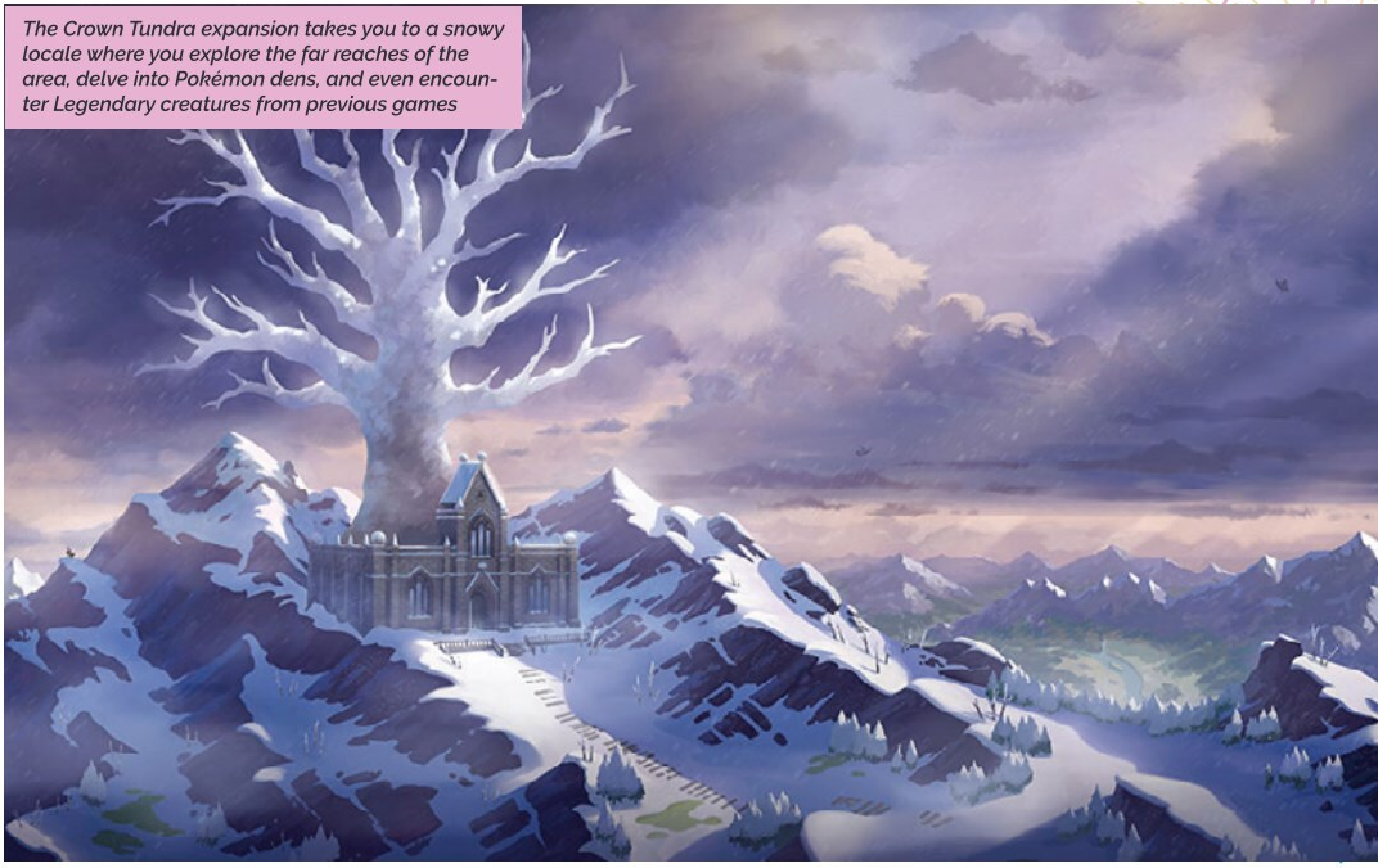
Catch An Early Glimpse

While it remains to be seen if the expansion pass approach is outright replacing the updated game method we've seen employed in titles as recent as 2017's Pokémon Ultra Sun & Ultra Moon, it is refreshing to be able to carry your save file directly into these new experiences and not have to replay the entire game just to access the new content. In fact, you can play the expansion content at nearly any juncture – the only requirement is you must have reached the Wild Area in the save file you're using.

The first expansion isn't set to hit until June, but in the meantime, all players can enjoy a small sneak peek of the new content. A free downloadable update for Pokémon Sword & Shield released last month, adding an encounter in Wedgehurst Station. Once you travel there, you meet Klara or Avery depending on which version you have. More importantly, you can catch the all-new Galarian Slowpoke. While you can't evolve it just yet, you can receive the needed evolution items in the upcoming expansions; you can evolve a Galarian Slowbro in the Isle of Armor, while you acquire the item needed to evolve a Galarian Slowking in the Crown Tundra.

If this brief sequence whets your appetite, you can pre-purchase the Expansion Pass for your corresponding game right now. Once you do that, you gain instant access to Pikachu and Eevee-themed uniforms to equip to your trainer.

With so many fans conditioned to not get new content throughout the life of a mainline Pokémon game, it remains to be seen how they will embrace the post-launch DLC model, especially with the Expansion Pass costing $30. However, with so much added content, these expansions hope to give players plenty of reasons to return to their adventures.



The Crown Tundra expansion takes you to a snowy locale where you explore the far reaches of the area, delve into Pokémon dens, and even encounter Legendary creatures from previous games

The Division 2: Warlords Of New York

Back to the Big Apple

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player
Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Massive

» **Release**
March 3

If you've suited up to battle the raging infection in Washington D.C., in The Division 2, it's time to go back – back to New York, where players first battled the Green Poison plague in the original game. The Division 2's first full-blown expansion features large system overhauls, a new level cap of 40, and a new antagonist. This expansion hopes to reinvigorate agents that have been playing forever – as well as attract newcomers.

Haven't played The Division 2 yet or are way behind? No problem. While you need to own the base game to play, the expansion comes with the option to create a character at level 30, suited and booted for the new content. There's a serious threat on the horizon: Aaron Keener, a Division agent gone rogue. From his stronghold in lower Manhattan, Keener seeks to destroy everything the rebuilding efforts have accomplished, harnessing a new strain of the virus to take down what he perceives as establishment forces by unleashing an even more virulent plague. Forget looking for bounties in museums and subways around D.C. – it's time to go back to where it all began and battle this twisted opponent.

Keener has turned other Division agents to his cause, with NYC under siege by these rogue agents. Players must discover their whereabouts in the city and take them on before attempting to take on Keener himself. These manhunts take players around new areas of the city such as the Civic Center, Battery Park, Two Bridges, and the Financial District. These zones contain Keener's four lieutenants, five main missions, eight side missions, and other activities to explore as you break through fogged areas on the map and uncover content.

If the Green Poison wasn't enough to level NYC as we know it, a catastrophic hurricane has also altered the landscape and changed the environment on a massive scale. In addition to leveling your character up to 40, Warlords of New York also features an infinite "post-leveling" system called SHD (Strategic Homeland Division) level, which means you can continue to develop by completing activities forever even after you've achieved the level cap. This system hopes to keep engagement high as players hit the endgame along with a deluge of variable tasks and hunts. The item system has been simplified and streamlined – you'll be able to easily identify upgrades immediately instead of spending valuable time scrolling through your bag and stash for powerful gear.

New skills are available for unlocking alongside exotic options for your equipment, with the goal of increasing build diversity and options along the way – far greater than the ones available in the base game. Not only will players participate in a continuous and growing endgame as they increase their SHD level, but the expansion also marks the beginning of seasons coming to The Division 2. These provide new story beats, objectives, unique rewards, and essentially create an evolving content model at a regular cadence, addressing the lack of activity concerns that players may have had with The Division 2's core content. I had a blast playing with my crew in The Division 2 when it launched, but found myself falling off hard due to the endgame offerings and content drop schedule, so hopefully this journey to New York brings me back and keeps me there for an extended session as an agent of The Division. » **Daniel Tack**

MLB The Show 20

Getting a jump

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(8-Player Online)

» Publisher
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» Developer
San Diego Studio

» Release
March 17

The full 162-game MLB season is daunting to say the least. How many routine throws to first and fly balls caught in the outfield does that add up to? To prevent you from becoming bored and picking dandelions in the outfield, developer San Diego Studio wants to give you something to think about on almost every pitch through more gameplay variance, added dynamism to the Road to the Show player career mode, and custom options for Franchise mode.

A big complaint about MLB 19 was the predominance of line drives. One of the ways the developers are trying to rectify this in MLB 20 is to tweak the outfielder's first step toward the ball depending on their ratings and based on stats from the league. This creates a decision point for the player in some situations (via a red indicator on the ball) as the ball leaves the bat. Can you sprint and make a diving catch on that line drive, or is it better to take it on the hop and hold the runner at first?

This isn't about creating more errors or skewing on the side of offense at the expense of defense. It's about more variety, stressing gamers' stick skills, and a wider range of player ratings. Players with good ratings are still going to make plays, but the more average ones might have to be conservative in some situations.

Throwing has also been adjusted to improve focus. The green target zone for accurate throws is now influenced by the specific situation at hand, distance, and the player's accuracy. That green success area may shrink while the moving timing needle speeds up. For throws to home, if you hit the timing just right, you can pull off a perfect throw – a throw that doesn't guarantee an out, but which increases your odds of getting one because you're placing the ball right where the catcher needs it for a good tag.

Successful stick skills can lead to other gains, such as in the Road to the Show mode. The personality and relationship systems are being expanded to reflect what happens during games. If your crew hits its stride and starts driving in runs and turning double plays, the chemistry of the players involved will improve, resulting in small attribute bumps. The mode also gives you a boost through an expanded in-game challenge system. Completing them now awards multiple prizes such as gains to both your contract attribute and the attribute's overall max. cap. Boss battles can even offer an item reward.

Finally, MLB 20's focus on more variety extends to Franchise mode through the ability to replace an existing team in the league or rebrand one with the customization options from Diamond Dynasty mode. Use the logo vault (or import one from MLB 19), choose a home stadium – including classic and minor-league parks, and more.

The MLB franchise is in a great place. Not only is it expanding to new, non-Sony platforms possibly as early as 2021, but it's building on the foundations set in previous years to take advantage of the series' stability and expand in exciting new directions. **» Matthew Kato**

Predator: Hunting Grounds

The ultimate hunt

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1 to 5-Player
Online Shooter

» Publisher
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» Developer
IllFonic

» Release
April 24

If you are a fan of asymmetrical cooperative multiplayer games like Friday the 13th and Dead by Daylight, you'll want to put Predator: Hunting Grounds on your radar. Four heavily armed humans from an elite fireteam are tasked with completing various objectives and surviving the attacks of a player-controlled Predator.

If you are on the fireteam, you pick a class and loadout, and then are thrown into the jungles of South America which are filled with A.I.-controlled enemies and that pesky Predator. The humans need to stick together if they hope to stand a chance against either threat. If they can complete their objectives, and more impressively kill the Predator, they simply need to reach the chopper for extraction. That's their victory condition.

The Predator needs to kill all of them, and can also use his assortment of gadgets on the A.I. adversaries. Just killing an enemy isn't enough for the Predator, however. He is a warrior that takes pride in his work and must pause for a set amount of time to extract a keepsake prize from his kill: their skull and spine. Removing these elements leaves him vulnerable and also slows him down.

As it should be, the Predator has a significant advantage over the humans. He can camouflage himself to hide in the trees. Yes, the other players should keep their eyes peeled for shimmers that reveal the Predator's location. He also can deal significant damage using his shoulder-mounted plasma caster, and can snipe foes with his Yautja Bow. For close-quarters attacks, the Predator is equipped with Wolverine-like wristblades, and can get in a few jabs with a combistick. If he sees multiple targets grouped together, he can highlight and chain them together for a strike with his smart disc.

The Predator's gadgets aren't the only thing the humans need to worry about. Pre-match, the player controlling him picks a class. The scout Predator is faster, its energy and health regenerate faster, and it can leap futher. The hunter class deals more melee damage, and has more stamina and health. The beserker class has the highest health, deals the most damage, and has tons of energy to dip into, but is slower, and its recharge rates are the lowest of the three classes.

Predator: Hunting Ground is releasing exclusively on PlayStation 4 on April 24, and will hopefully deliver plenty of additional content in the following months. » **Andrew Reiner**

West Of Dead

Fire and brimstone hat

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1- Player Action

» Publisher
Raw Fury

» Developer
Upstream Arcade

» Release
2020

The wind howls like a demon as you saunter out of the bar and into a darkened cavern. You don't remember what brought you to this wretched place, and you don't plan on staying long. Word has it that the nearby wilds are teeming with wendigos and witches. But, you don't have time to explore. A shadow stirs from one of the darkest corners of this cavern. As the beast stumbles toward the light, you unload unholy fury from the tip of your six-shooter. The creature is dead almost instantly, but before its body hits the floor, a second monster tumbles forward. You get the sinking suspicion that your night isn't going to end well. Welcome to Purgatory, Wyoming, in 1888.

Upstream Arcade is a relatively unknown developer, but its newest game is incredibly striking. This roguelike twin-stick shooter combines a comic-book aesthetic with dark tales from the American Old West. Ron Perlman voices the main character, a dead man named William Mason who descends into the grim world of Purgatory with only a vague recollection of the events that brought him there and the memory of a figure in black burned into his brain.

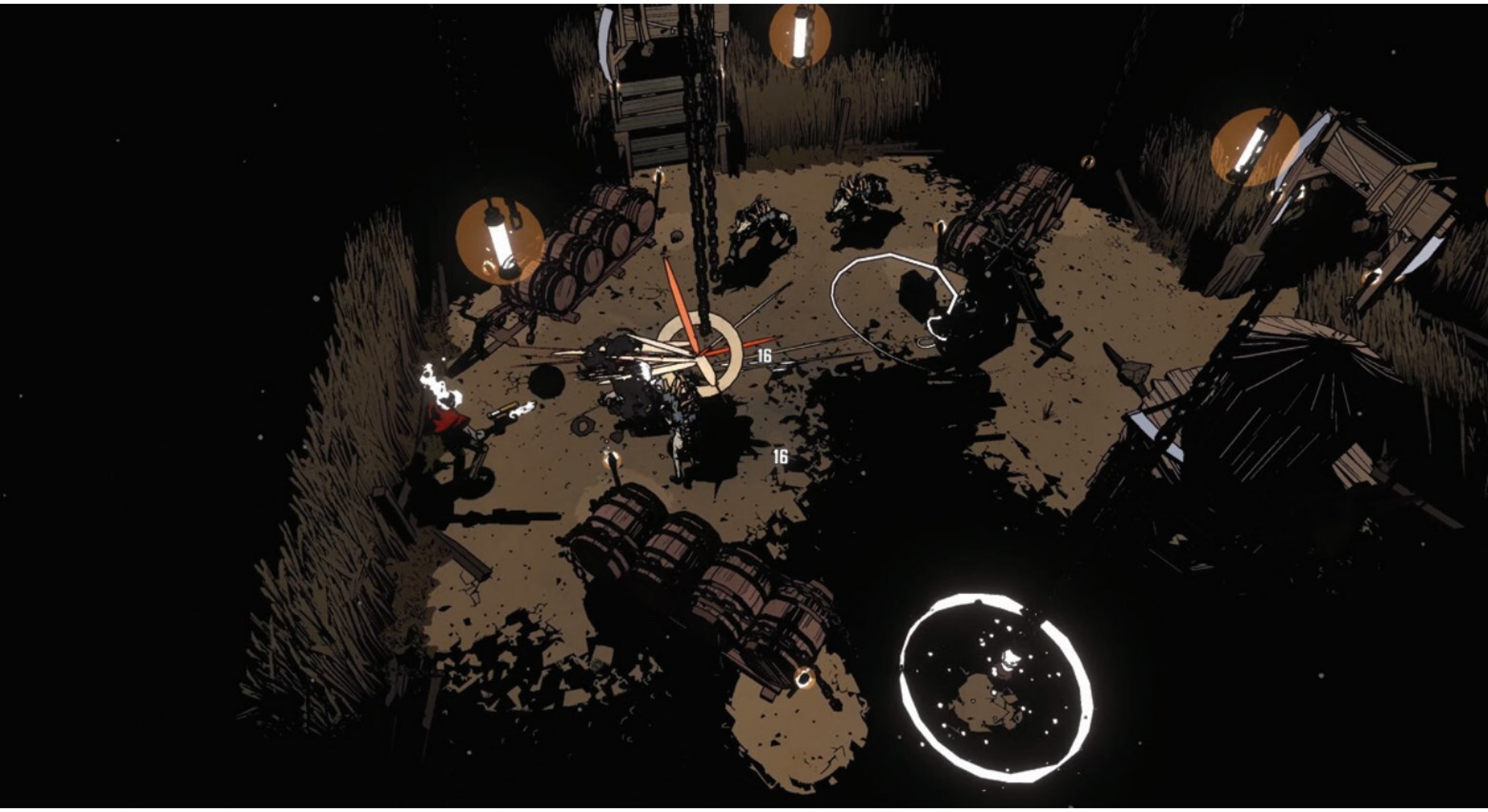
Like most roguelikes, players explore a series of procedurally generated areas and fight off the variety of monsters that live there. The action is a bit slow for a twin-stick shooter, but Mason automatically takes cover when you approach waist-high objects, which allows for more tactical combat. Another wrinkle to the action involves managing the darkness. Each room is pitch black as you enter, so you won't know what dangers await you until you're in the thick of it. However, in the center of most rooms are a series of lamps, and as soon as you touch these lamps, they illuminate the area and stun nearby foes. Cautious players might inch toward the lamps, trying not to startle nearby monsters, but I find it more fun to race to each lamp before the monsters get me, and then take out my pursuers while they are stunned by the initial flash.

West of Dead features a variety of deadly weapons, and each one has its own stats. Early on, I find a level 1 farmer's shotgun that is great for one-shotting enemies at close range but which performs poorly against distant foes. Later on, I discover a traitor's revolver that does about a third of the shotgun's damage, but can fire off six bullets before needing a reload. Each weapon in West of Dead comes with its own pros and cons, so smartly managing your loadout could mean the difference between life and death.

Scattered throughout West of Dead's procedurally generated levels are a variety of upgrade stations that allow you to level up Mason's health, damage output, or reload speed. Naturally, these stats reset when you die and start a new run. Sadly, West of Dead's current build doesn't show off the game's roguelike loop, so I didn't get a feel for how the mechanics would evolve from one run to the next.

My demo ends with a fight against a wendigo – a towering horned beast with a skull for a face and a fin of bones protruding from the back of its spine. The Wendigo slowly marches toward me, so he isn't hard to hit, but there are no great places to take cover, and he occasionally dashes across the room, slashing at me with razor-sharp claws.

West of Dead's first demo wasn't very challenging (I killed the wendigo boss on my first run). Still, Upstream Arcade's twin-stick action feels good and the game has a great overall vibe, so West of Dead is definitely one roguelike to watch this year.
» Ben Reeves

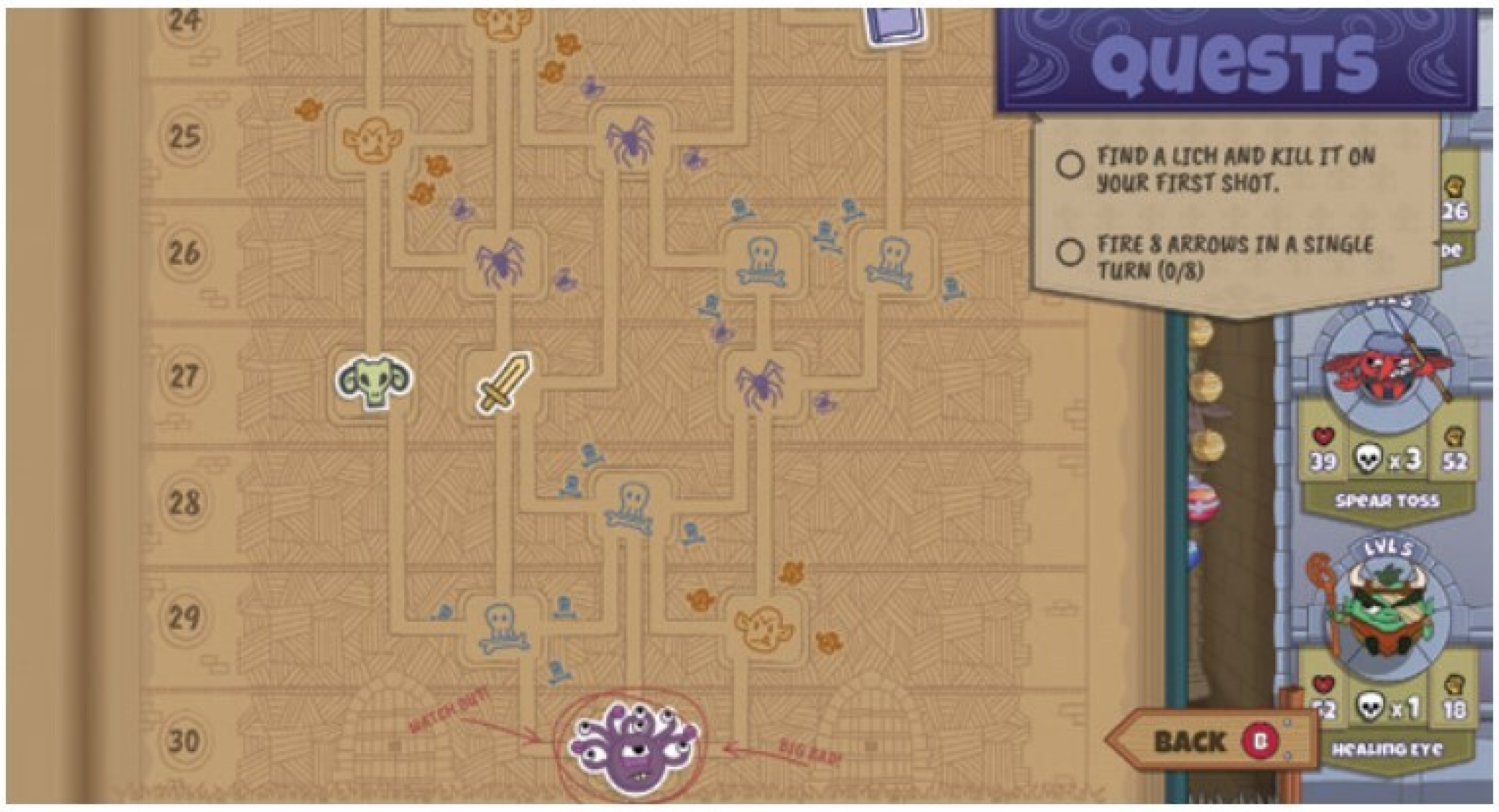


Roundguard

Peggle meets roguelike

Back in the day before microtransactions and season passes took over much of the games marketplace, PopCap made its name with endlessly replayable arcade-style experiences like Bejeweled, Zuma, and Peggle – simple games with a ton of fun and polish built in. Wonderbelly Games has no formal connection to those projects. However, its debut effort, Roundguard, draws an unmistakable line of descent from Peggle, lifting wholesale the core gameplay loop of firing off a bouncing ball to have it careen wildly through the stage as your point total rattles up. Roundguard has more up its sleeve than just a straight-up imitation, however, drawing on the popular trend of roguelike dungeon crawlers to present a simple but rewarding game where physics and character leveling sit side-by-side.

Roundguard is all about classic RPG-style dungeon exploration, but with a high-speed sphere for a hero. I start my first playthrough by selecting one of three different, but familiar, archetypes: the warrior, rogue, or wizard. Each has the expected distinctions, like my beefy fighter boasting powerful armor, but with less-explosive magic. Equippable options begin bare bones, but slots for weapons, armor, relics, trinkets, and abilities showcase the ways my character options are fleshed out over the course of play.



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QUESTS
FIND A LICH AND KILL IT ON YOUR FIRST SHOT.
FIRE 8 ARROWS IN A SINGLE TURN (0/8)
39 x3 52
SPEAR TOSS
LVL 5
x1 18
HEALING EYE
BACK

Each stage fires off my bouncing fantasy character at the top of the keep from a ballista, smashing into gold-filled pots, helpful red healing potions, and importantly, a variety of nasty monsters (from giant spiders to tireless skeletal archers). Clear all the enemies, and I can descend further into the keep, eventually fighting bosses, acquiring new loot that expands my capabilities, and dropping even deeper into the sprawling dungeon beneath the castle.

Veteran Peggle players don't need to be sold on how the concept engenders fun. There's just enough strategy to firing off the "ball" in the right direction, and like in pinball or pachinko, there's something delightful about watching it bounce back and forth as it makes its hard-to-predict course to the base of the stage. Here, that formula is enhanced by all the excitement of a procedurally generated roguelike dungeon crawl. Be careful to maintain your hit-point total, but don't neglect the need for offensive attacks against enemies. Gather items and select equippables that match your playstyle. Choose your most efficient path through the map of upcoming rooms to get further than your last playthrough.

As soon as my hit points ran out, I eagerly cued up my next character's run, this time more confident about how to get just a little further. Wonderbelly has homed in on a charming, cartoony art style that perfectly matches the lighthearted tone of play. And I saw a lot of variety across the board in everything from collected loot to monster variants, making me eager to try out different builds and powers. While Roundguard isn't blazing any trails in innovative core gameplay, the Peggle formula is so enjoyable that it's hard to believe we haven't seen more attempts at this kind of translation into a roguelike structure. If you share my nostalgia and enthusiasm for that great old game, Roundguard may well be worth bouncing over to check out when it releases in the coming months.

» **Matt Miller**

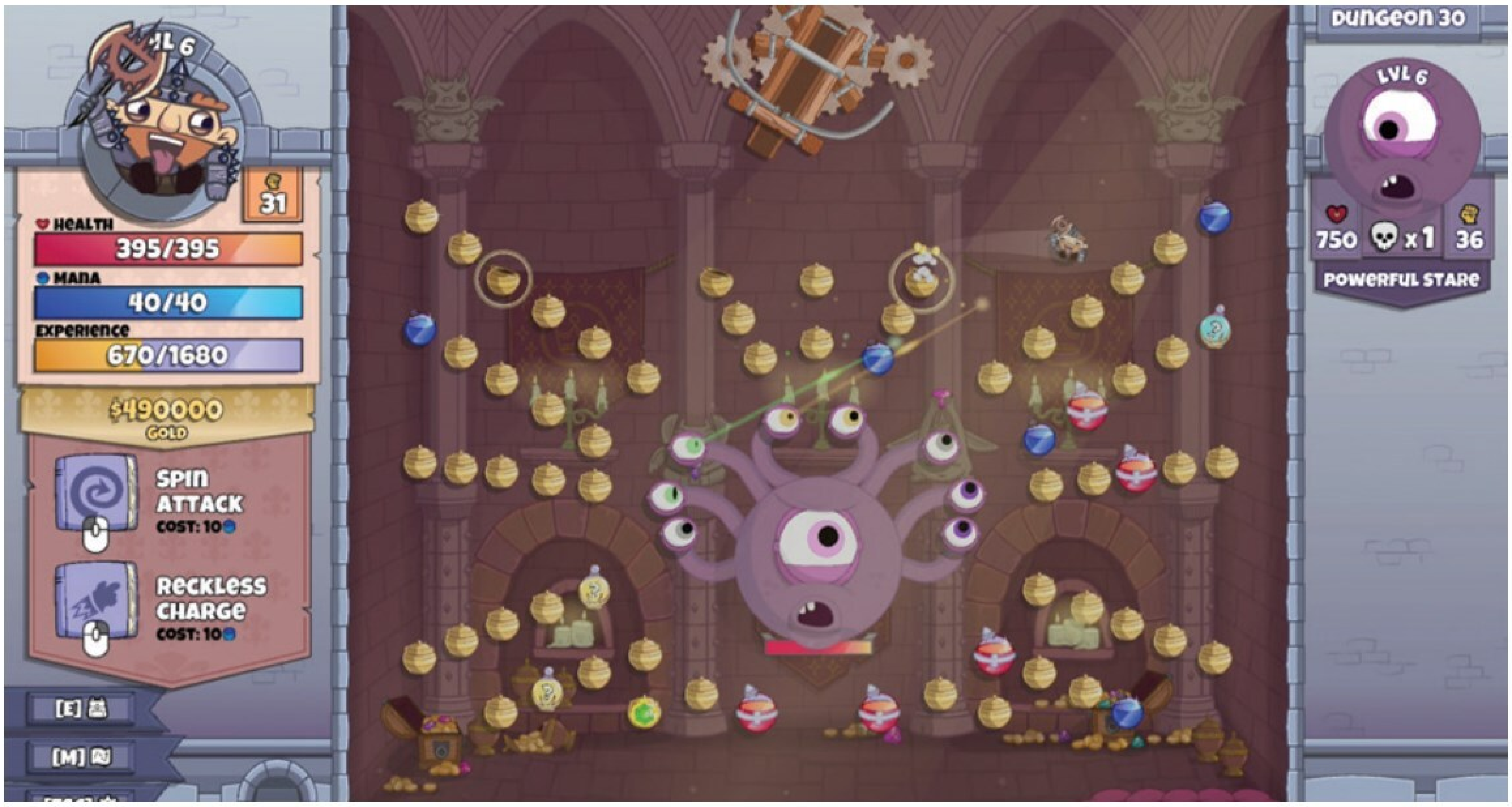
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Arcade

» **Publisher**
Quantum
Astrophysicists Guild

» **Developer**
Wonderbelly Games

» **Release**
Spring



Tainted Grail

A shadowy Arthurian legend

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Awaken Realms Digital

» Developer
Awaken Realms Digital

» Release
2020

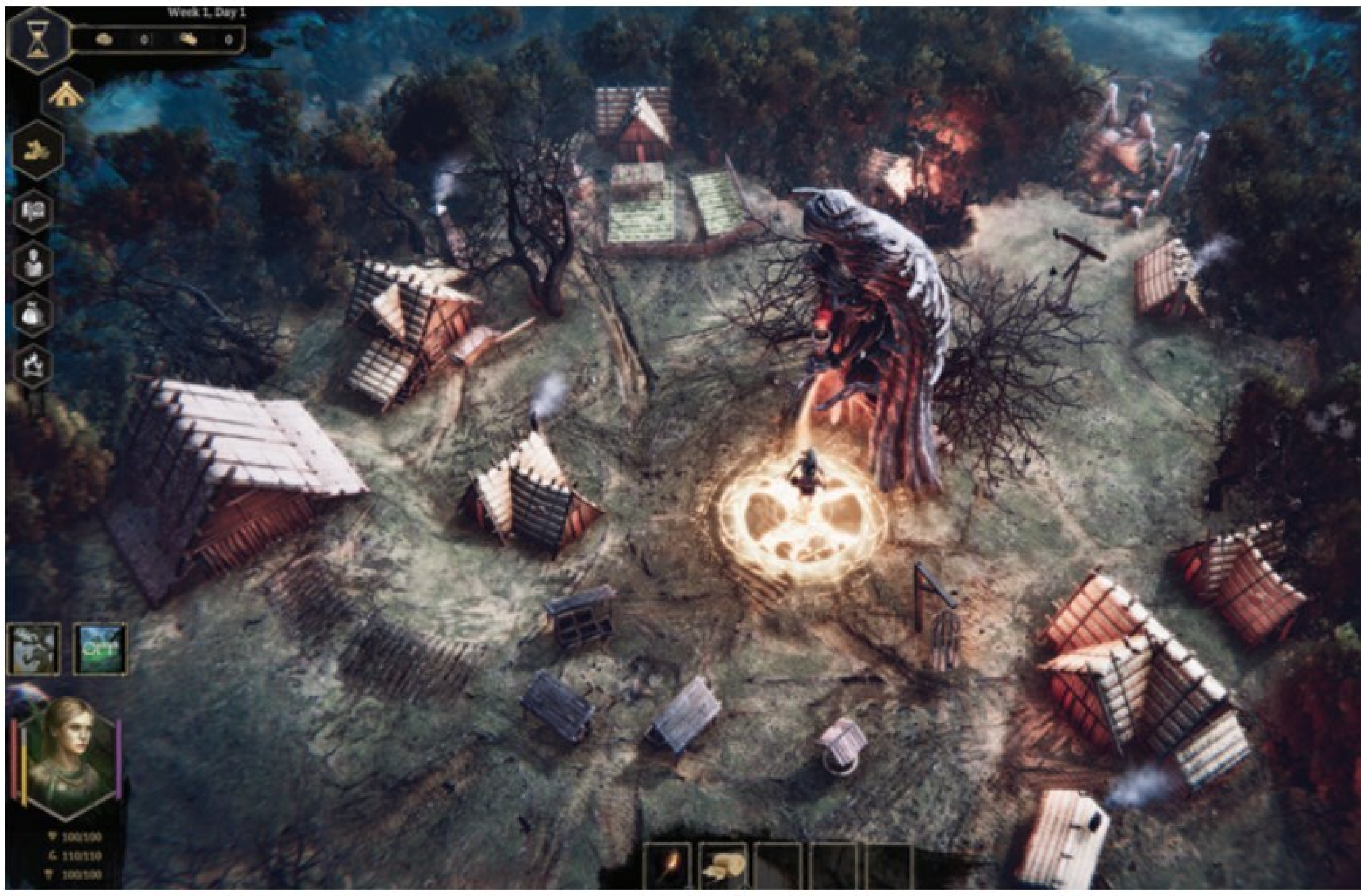
The mythology around King Arthur and his knights persists for a reason; these archetypal legends capture the imagination, no matter your age. The developers at Awaken Realms have a clear fascination with the old tales of Merlin, Excalibur, and the Round Table, but Tainted Grail starts in a place that feels completely different. Mixing deep and novel-esque narrative, turn-based exploration, and an intriguing card-based combat system, the game is a surprising twist on open-world RPGs, rooted in one of the defining legends of western culture.

Hundreds of years have passed since the Knights of the Round Table conquered the land and Merlin set up great warding stones called Menhir to ward off evil across Avalon. Now, centuries later, those ancient magics have begun to falter, and a reality-warping Wyrdness mangles anyone and anything that wanders too far from the scattered farmsteads and villages. After the greatest heroes of your town leave to find salvation at Kamelot (and never returned) you are all that's left, and must find a way to save yourself, along with the rest of the beleaguered people eking out an existence in the darkness.

After three hours of playing an early build, Tainted Grail is an impressive and unexpected treat. Smartly written narrative sequences and nearly constant morally gray choices gradually peel back the layers to unveil a story that takes my small-town hero into the broader world. Exploration is freeform as I discover an isometric view of the village and its environs, but movement and actions slowly advance a turn counter, and resources like my meager supply of food deplete as I wander. Step outside the village, and only the burning of a special candle holds back the horrible curse of the Wyrdness, and those candles only last for a few turns, lending a constant sense of desperation.

Brigands and malformed creatures populate the forest beyond, and combat is extremely dangerous; your game can end quickly with a few wrong decisions. In a fight, a hand of cards is pulled from a larger deck. Cards let you enact offensive and defensive combos through a clever mix of color-coded runes, while a momentum system carries one card's effect over to the next. You're also managing an array of buffs and debuffs for both your hero and foes. Leveling up adds new cards and skills into your arsenal, but even early on, I found the flow of combat to be engaging and strategically rewarding.

The bleak tone and thoughtfully crafted characters you meet are what give the game its biggest draw, and it cleverly disguises the elements of Arthurian legend, teasing a much grander history and story to discover. With deliberate pacing, turn-based strategic combat, and lots of text reading, Tainted Grail won't be the perfect fit for everyone. But fans of innovative story-crafting are going to want to keep this on their radar. » **Matt Miller**

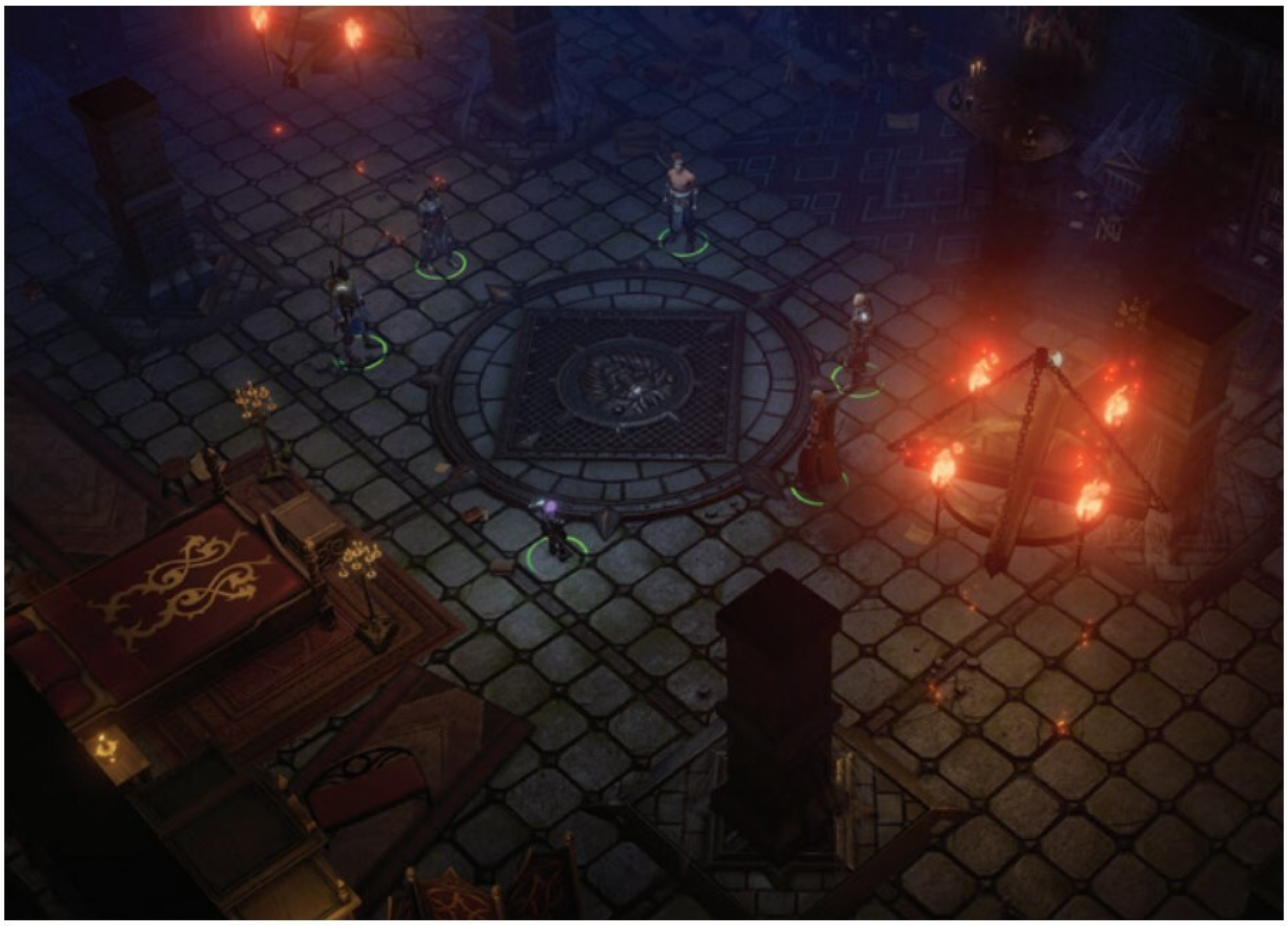


The Tabletop Connection

Tainted Grail is the video game incarnation of the universe first seen in the recently released tabletop project called Tainted Grail: Fall of Avalon. That board game was one of the biggest success stories of the last few years in the world of game crowdfunding, and has drawn significant praise from critics and players. The video game offers a different perspective and narrative, and the developer says the stories are separate but complementary.

Pathfinder: Wrath Of The Righteous

Demonic domination



Got demons? The world in Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous sure does. Owlcat Game's followup to its CRPG Pathfinder: Kingmaker takes players to a new setting where demons have enslaved and destroyed basically everything in their path. Using a new set of tools, classic real-time-with-pause combat, and negotiating using your stats and choices make all the difference as you assemble a team to take on a motley assortment of hellions, insects, and other demonic forces.

While it's easy to look at the isometric scenery and Dungeons & Dragons roots and simply assume Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous falls in line with other modern CRPG offerings, Owlcat is inserting some new systems to spice things up. The most important of these is Mythic Paths for your characters, allowing you to gain powers and abilities far beyond the scope of typical skills.

You may become a mighty lich, bending the dead and your conquered foes to your will and turning them into companions and allies. Maybe you will alter time itself to fix problems before they even begin – a massively ambitious undertaking that changes the game in front of you. Or maybe a trickster is right for you, allowing you to turn those bad dice rolls into good ones, swapping your critical failures for critical successes and changing the world around them.

CRPGs are experiencing a broad renaissance, and I'm looking forward to slaughtering hordes of imps, demons, and gurgling insect lords when Owlcat's new offering arrives next year. » **Daniel Tack**

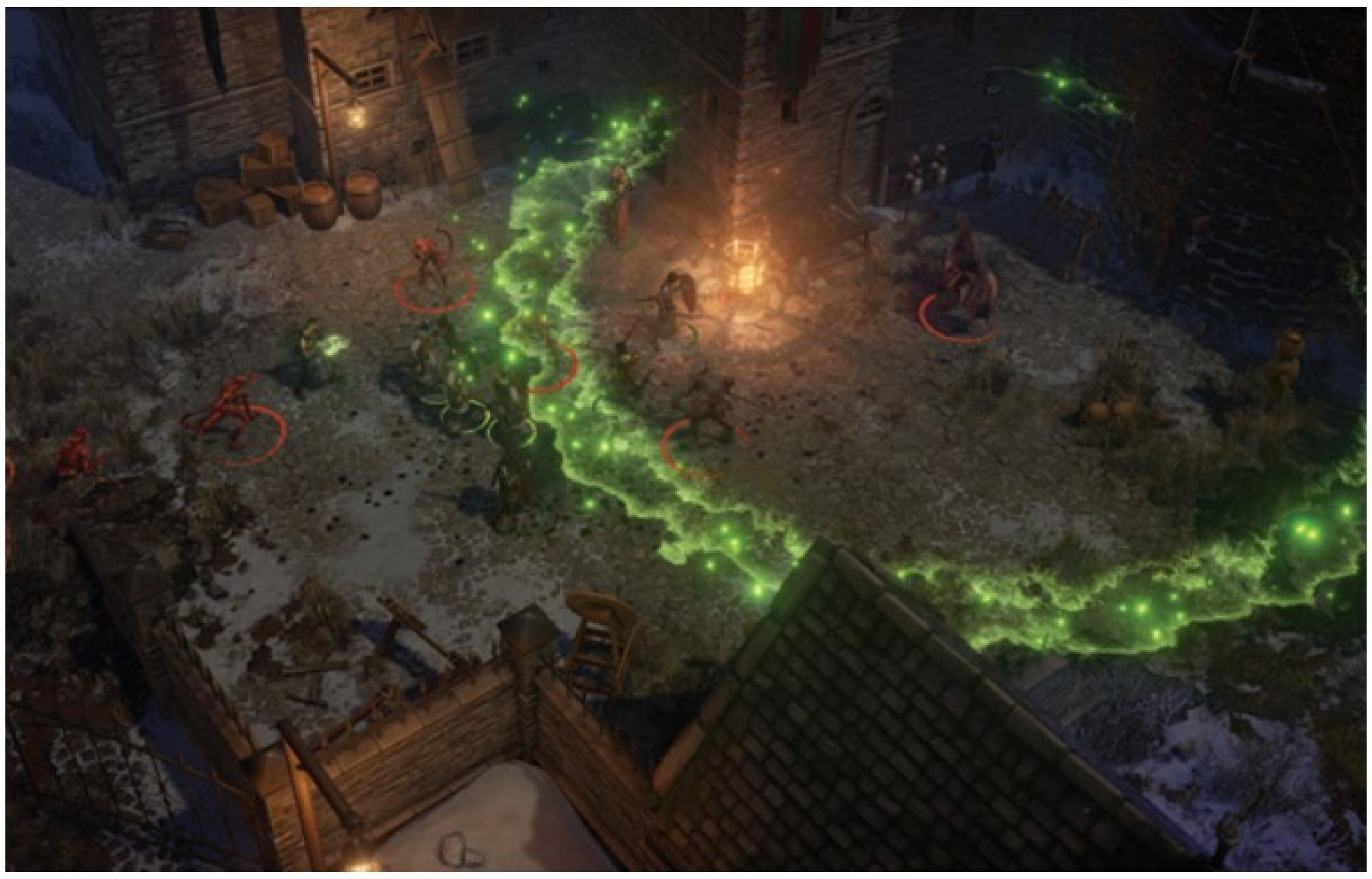
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Owlcat Games

» **Developer**
Owlcat Games

» **Release**
2021



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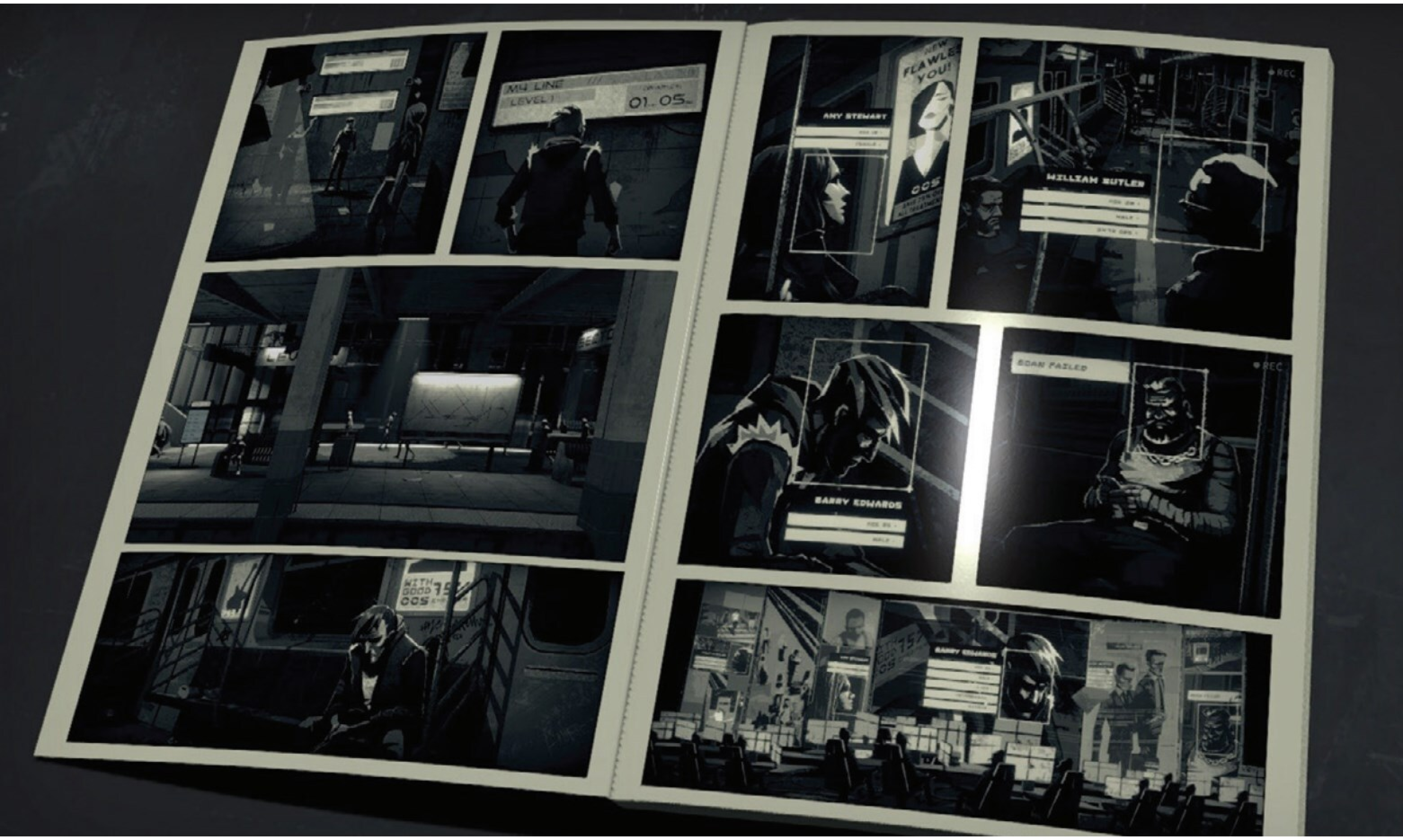


Liberated

Big brother is watching

» **Platform**
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1- Player Action/Stealth

» **Publisher**
Walkabout Games

» **Developer**
Atomic Wolf and L.inc

» **Release**
2020

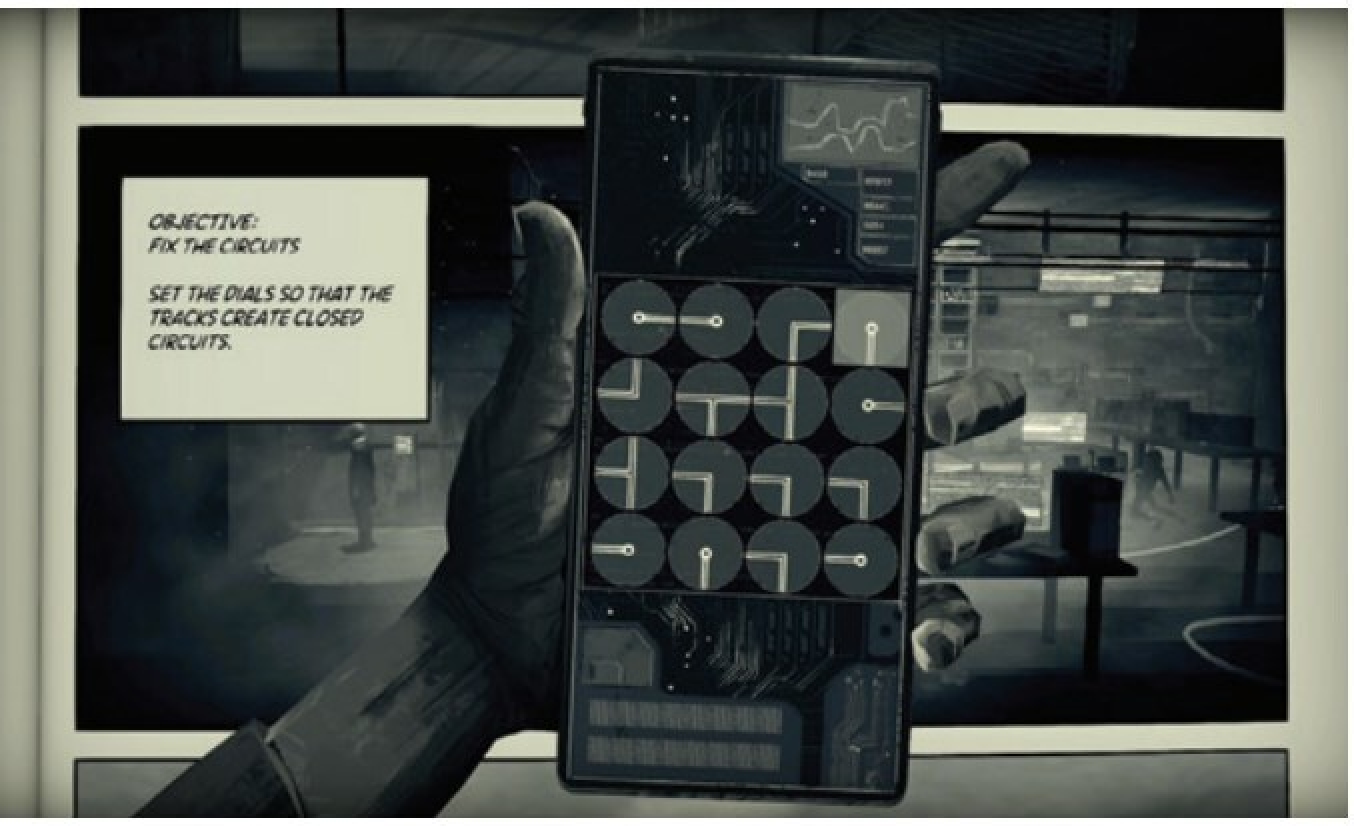
Take one look at Liberated and you'll see developer Walkabout Games' love for the medium of comics. The entire narrative is told through sequential comic panels – even interactive sequences take place inside their own designated box. However, you won't find any superheroes flying below these word balloons. Instead, Liberated's narrative is a grounded exploration of a near-future society where big brother controls the masses through the manipulation of social-media networks, facial-recognition software, and citizen credit systems.

Throughout this gritty adventure, players dip into the perspective of several freedom fighters and explore how various rebel factions fight for justice using different means. Each chapter is designated as its own comic book. In issue number one, players jump into the shoes of a young, rebellious hacker and follow along as he is drawn deeper into a conflict of ideals. In another issue, players take on the role of a state-sanctioned police officer who is tasked with chasing down a number of those rebels who – according to the government – have endangered the general population. Ultimately, Walkabout aims to tell a variety of stories from both sides of the battle in an effort to show how modern conflicts are colored by various shades of gray.

All of Liberated's characters have a unique loadout, but players might occasionally opt to keep those safeties on since many scenarios can be approached through stealth or platforming. During one early sequence, a rebel races through a train station, jumping over turnstiles and dodging pedestrians. Later on, he is asked to infiltrate a government facility; players can either stick to the shadows to avoid patrolling guards or race forward, guns blazing.

Between firefights, players occasionally encounter hacking puzzles. During these minigames, players must rotate or move several tiny chipsets across a board to complete any electrical circuit on the screen. Hacking minigames are rarely beloved by players, but Walkabout says that recent playtesters wanted more hacking minigames, so we're interested in getting our hands on this part of the game to see if the studio has finally cracked the code on cracking virtual codes.

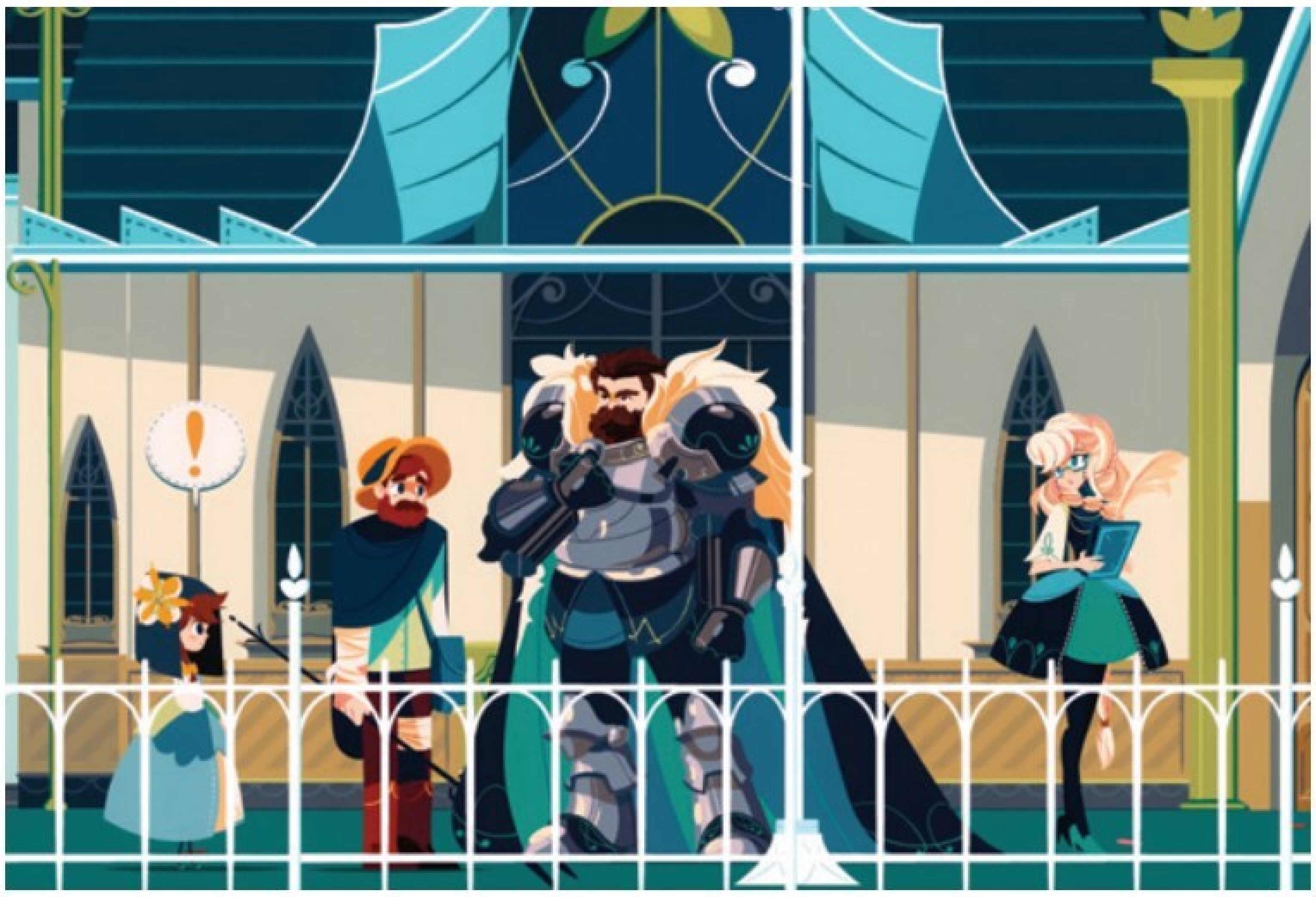
Liberated's development spun out of Walkabout's desire to push comics in new directions, and Liberated looks like a noir graphic novel come to life. Fortunately, it may also be an inventive side-scrolling action game set within an eerily familiar world where technology controls its population's daily lives. We'll find out if Walkabout Games has successfully blended two of our favorite mediums when Liberated releases later this year. » **Ben Reeves**


OBJECTIVE:
FIX THE CIRCUITS

SET THE DIALS SO THAT THE TRACKS CREATE CLOSED CIRCUITS.

Cris Tales

Time jumping to better outcomes



» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Modus Games

» Developer
Dreams Uncorporated,
SYCK

» Release
2020

Billed as a love letter to classic JRPGs, Cris Tales is turning the heads of the genre's most dedicated fans. With a gorgeous fairytale book art style and interesting time-jumping mechanics, this RPG borrows elements from beloved titles such as Chrono Trigger and Valkyrie Profile while also building its own unique world and combat mechanics. I recently went hands-on with the game and could see why enthusiasm is growing for the indie project.

Cris Tales' vibrant, distinct 2D art-style immediately catches the eye and draws you into its fantasy world on the brink of devastation. Things may appear fine on the surface, but evil is lurking, and the only way to stop it is to try to reshape the future by jumping through time. What's cool about the time-hopping mechanic is simultaneously seeing the past, present, and future thanks to an ability that can transform things as you walk past them. It's like seeing a quick version of how things can change. One minute you'll see a character in their youth, the next you can see them as an elder. Part of your adventure is finding ways to alter unfavorable outcomes by using the past, present, and future to get different information or find specific items. The game also has branching paths and forces you to make difficult choices. For instance, in the demo I have the option to choose between two different houses to save, with kind and innocent bystanders worthy of help.

The time-shifting strategy also extends to the turn-based battles. Using your wits, you can turn the tide in your favor. At one point in the demo, I launch a water spell at a powerful shield then move into the future where this causes it to rust, thus making its defense drastically decrease. Not only does the combat force you to think ahead, but it also requires you to be in the moment, since timing factors into your success. If you press the attack button as you strike an enemy, you have the opportunity to land a second hit. The same goes for blocking; if you press a button as the enemy strikes you, you block and take less damage. This sounds simplistic, but the timing varies from enemy to enemy based on their attack patterns. I had one that unleashed a flurry of magic attacks and if I missed one block, the damage was deadly, causing me to get hit multiple times. Apparently, you can also synchronize attacks for powerful group abilities, but the demo didn't give me the opportunity to test that out, nor did I run into any of the recruitable characters, which also seems like a big feature of the game.

Cris Tales has a lot of different elements to explore, and its fairytale backdrop is enticing and inviting. I really enjoyed how it makes you think outside the box to solve problems in and out of battle. The demo had me going back and forth between areas quite a bit, which got a little tiresome, but it's hard to know how much that will play into the full game. So far, Cris Tales looks promising and is worth keeping an eye on. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Disintegration

Adding a new layer of strategy to the FPS genre

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
Private Division

» Developer
V1 Interactive

» Release
2020

We've been patiently waiting to play more of Disintegration, the first-person shooter from Marcus Lehto, the co-creator of the Halo franchise. We came away impressed from our hands-on time last year, but January's technical beta test was our most extensive look yet at the promising shooter/real-time strategy hybrid from V1 Interactive.

Disintegration puts a weapon in your hands, but this is far from what boots-on-the-ground action franchises like Call of Duty and Battlefield have led fans to expect from a first-person shooter. Instead, you float above the battlefield in a Gravcycle, blasting fellow pilots, as well as their A.I. ground-troop minions. Because you're up in the air, movement is a bit floatier, but the extra dimensions flight adds to battles makes for intriguing conflicts.

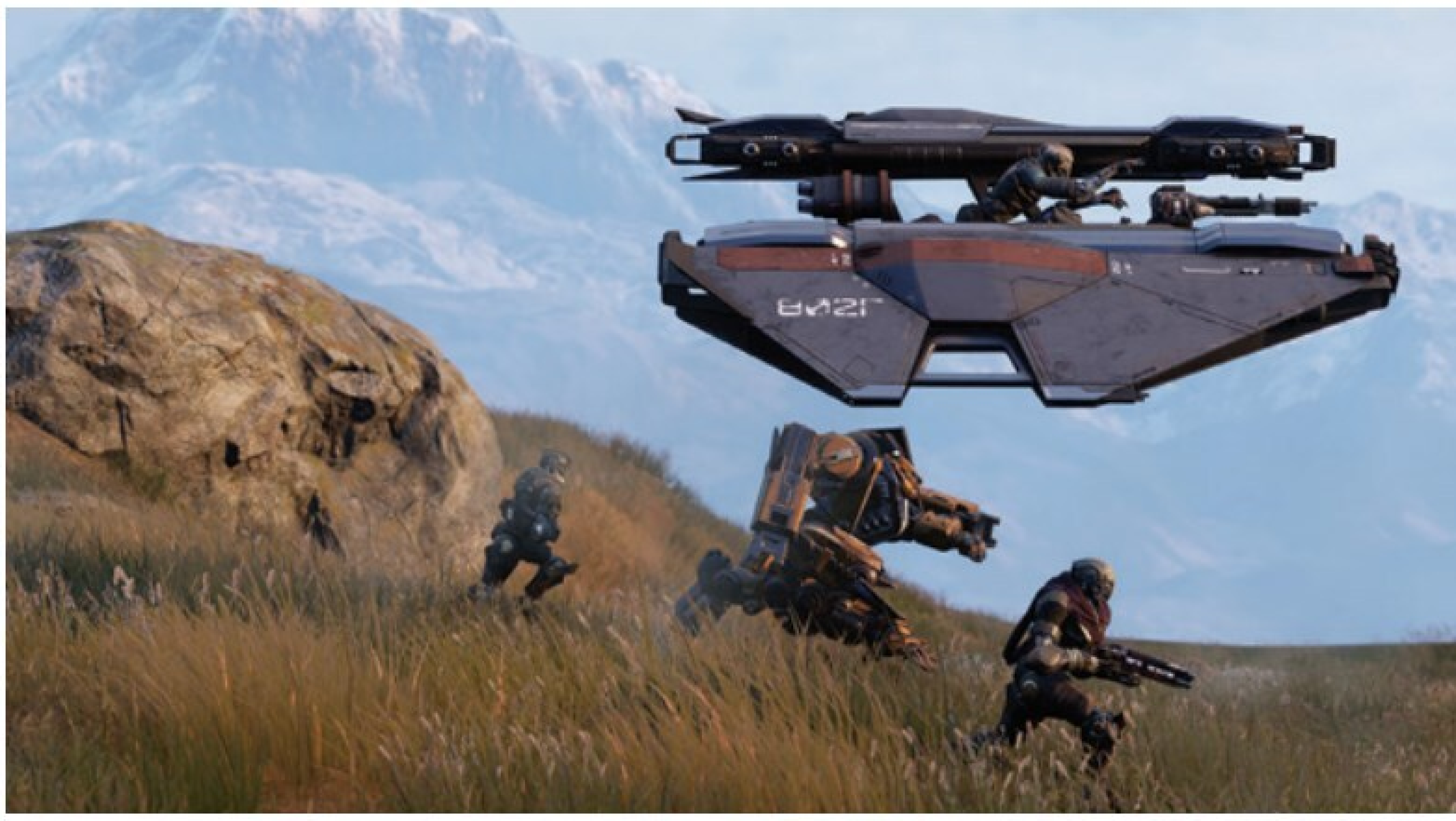
The beta featured seven distinct factions. Each faction has its own visual theme, as well as a weapon set. While I was initially drawn to the Lost Ronin's samurai theme with its single-shot marksman cannon and heat-seeking missiles, I eventually settled on The Business thanks to the combination of a chaingun primary weapon and a powerful shotgun as its alternate weapon. Since your alt-fire operates on a cooldown, I employed a strategy of tearing into enemies with the high-speed chaingun before boosting toward the unsuspecting enemy craft and inflicting massive damage with the shotgun.

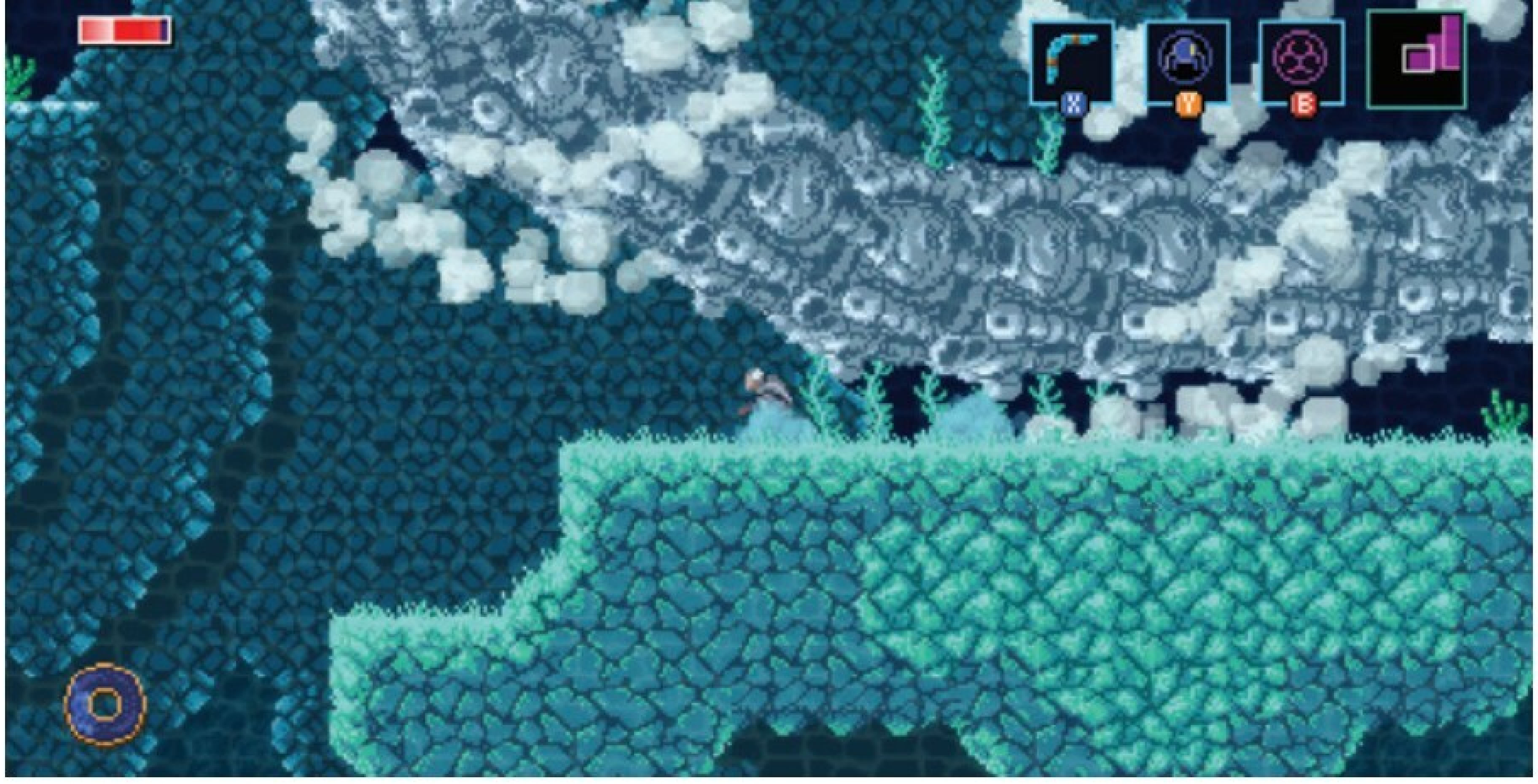
In addition to battling other Gravcycles, you can also give commands to your squad of A.I. minions on the ground. With a tap of the right bumper, I commanded my minions where to move or concentrate their fire; this was extremely helpful in frantic firefights as I could get an enemy down to low health, tell my minions to focus fire on the wounded target, then move on to the next enemy in range, trusting my A.I. squad to clean up the mess.

I played two modes: Zone Control and Retrieval. While Zone Control is a typical domination-style mode, Retrieval is a bit more distinct, having teams take turns defending three cores spread throughout the map while the other tries to deliver them to an extraction point. These two modes provide central points for clashes to happen, delivering the most action in the shortest time possible. The only mode that doesn't promise to do this is Collector, which sounds similar to Call of Duty's Kill Confirmed, as you defeat enemies and pick up cans. Unfortunately, this mode was not available during the beta.

In addition to competitive multiplayer, Disintegration delivers a single-player campaign that explores the lore of the game, where human brains have been placed in robot bodies to help humans survive the problems caused by overpopulation and pollution. Unfortunately, these integrated organisms began hunting down remaining humans and fighting those who rebel against them. You play as Romer Shoal, a rebel Integrated who's an expert Gravcycle pilot trying to fight back on humanity's behalf.

While Disintegration may not be a traditional first-person shooter, it features many of the trappings of the games that made the genre the juggernaut it is today. By adding real-time strategy elements into the mix, V1 Interactive hopes to achieve something special when Disintegration launches later this year. » **Brian Shea**





Axiom Verge 2

New mysteries in a frozen world

Even among the many games that cite Metroid as inspiration, Axiom Verge stands apart. Originally released in 2015, it has clever puzzles, unique weapons, and a mind-bending story. However, it only gives players a narrow view of its world, hinting at a vast and complex history left unexplored. Later this year, Axiom Verge 2 finally gives us a deeper look into that mythology, seen through the eyes of a new hero with a new suite of cool gadgets and abilities.

This time, players control Indra, a billionaire who runs a conglomerate called Globe 3. While in Antarctica, Indra discovers a portal that leads to an alternate world covered in ice and snow – and this is the uncharted territory that players explore in Axiom Verge 2. Some of Indra's powers are similar to Trace's from the first game, like using a remote drone to scout areas. Indra can also hack enemies to produce different effects, which seems to be a variation on Trace's glitching ability. Whatever specifics have changed, Axiom Verge 2 appears to offer another satisfying arsenal of weapons, a huge open world, and various mobility-focused abilities that open up new routes on the map.

However, not everything about this follow-up is familiar. Though the events have a connection to Trace's adventures on Sudra, Indra's quest is set in an entirely new location. When exactly this all happens is another tricky topic; Axiom Verge 2 is presented as both a prequel and a sequel, covering elements of the series' timeline both before and after the original. Does that make sense? Maybe not, but it wouldn't be Axiom Verge without raising a few questions.

Like the original, Axiom Verge 2 is being developed by Tom Happ, who handles the graphics, music, design, and programming himself. After working on the game for nearly four years, Axiom Verge 2 was only recently revealed at a Nintendo indie showcase. While Switch will be the exclusive launch platform for the game, it could roll out to other platforms over time. After all, the first game hit PlayStation 4 first, but was eventually available on all major platforms, including Vita and Wii U.

We still have plenty to learn about Axiom Verge 2 before its release this fall (including a so-called "major feature" that has yet to be revealed), but we can't wait to step back into this captivating universe. » **Joe Juba**

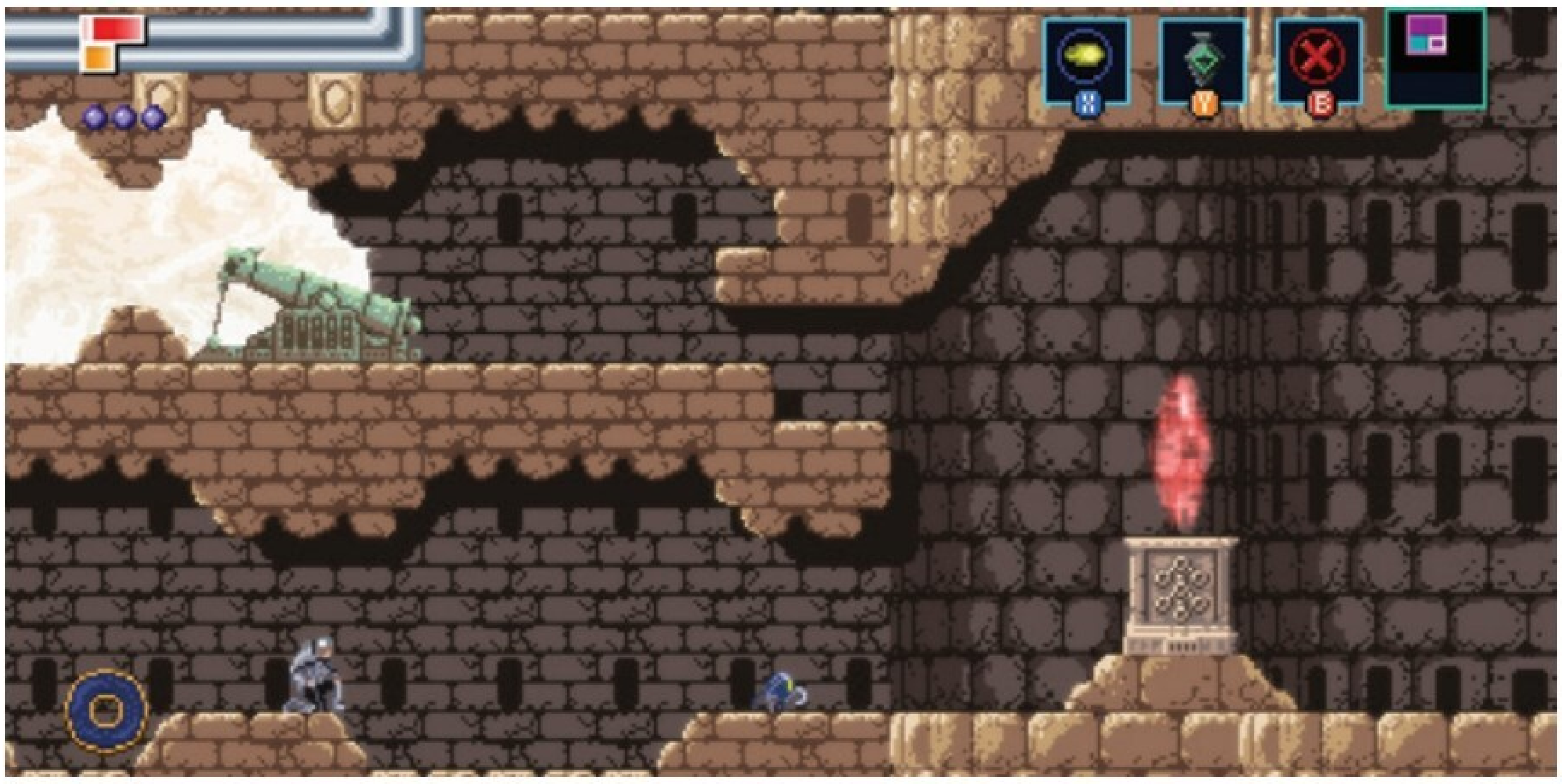
» **Platform**
Switch

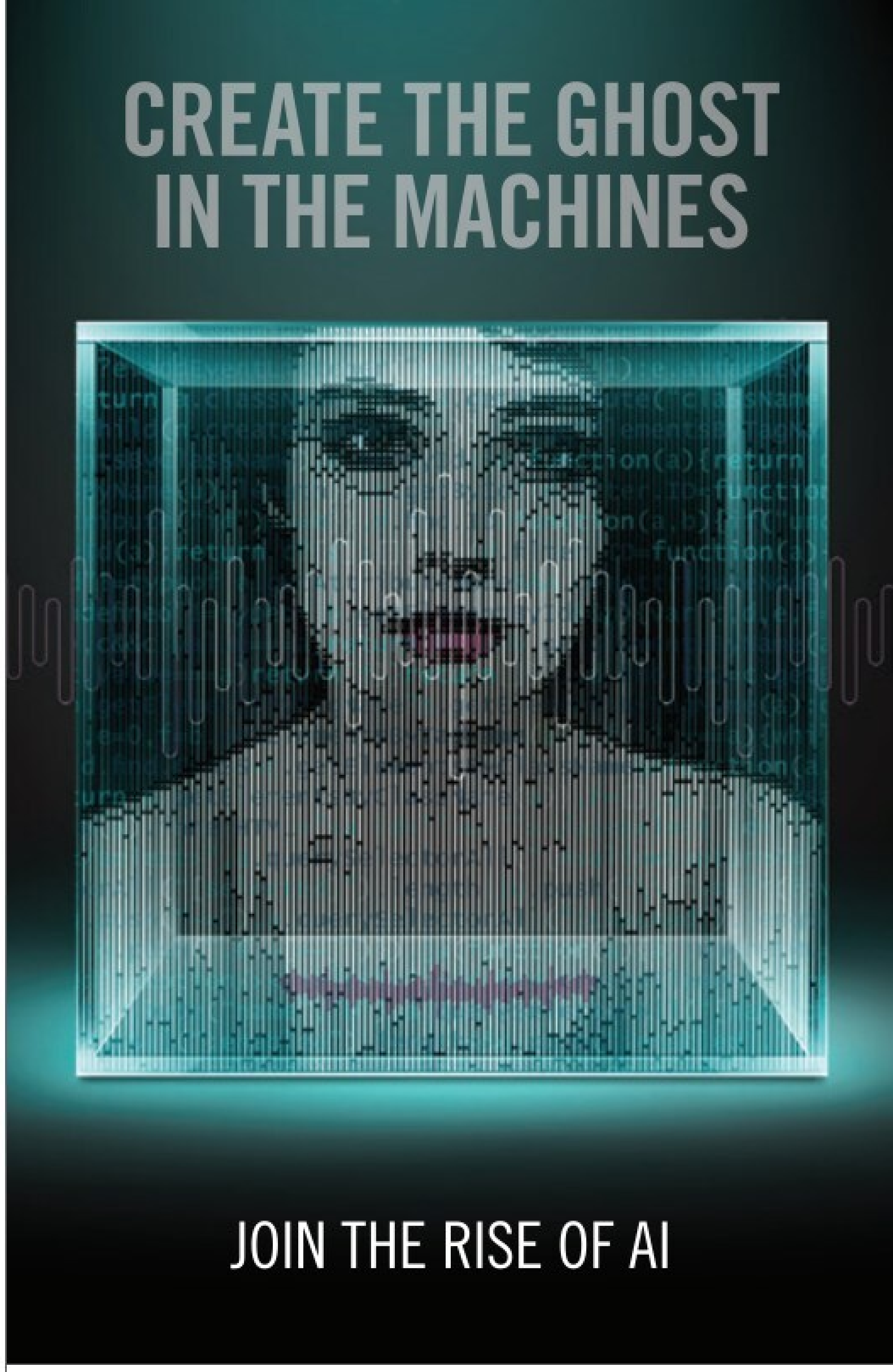
» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Thomas Happ Games

» **Developer**
Thomas Happ Games

» **Release**
Fall





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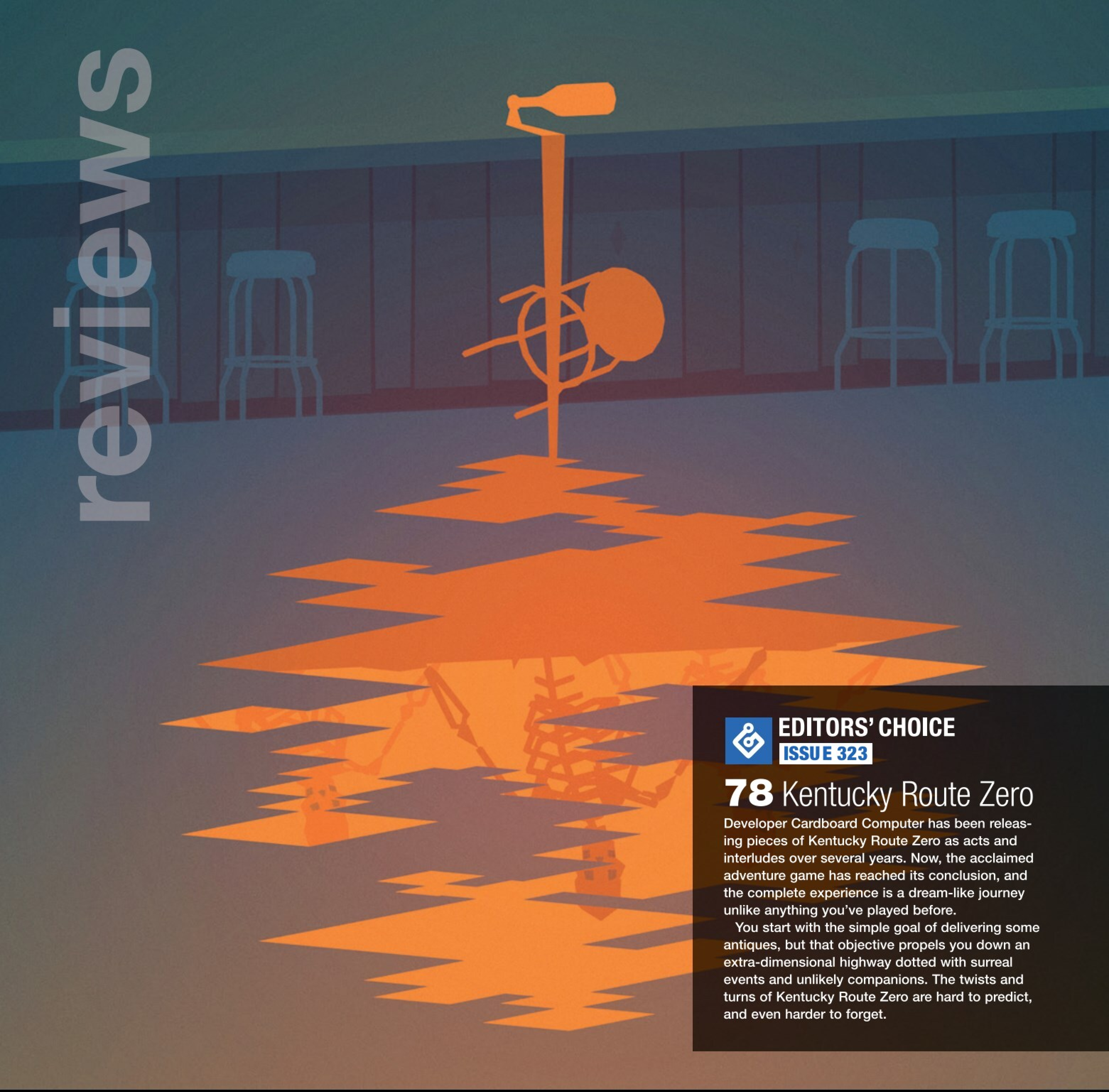


EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 323

78 Kentucky Route Zero

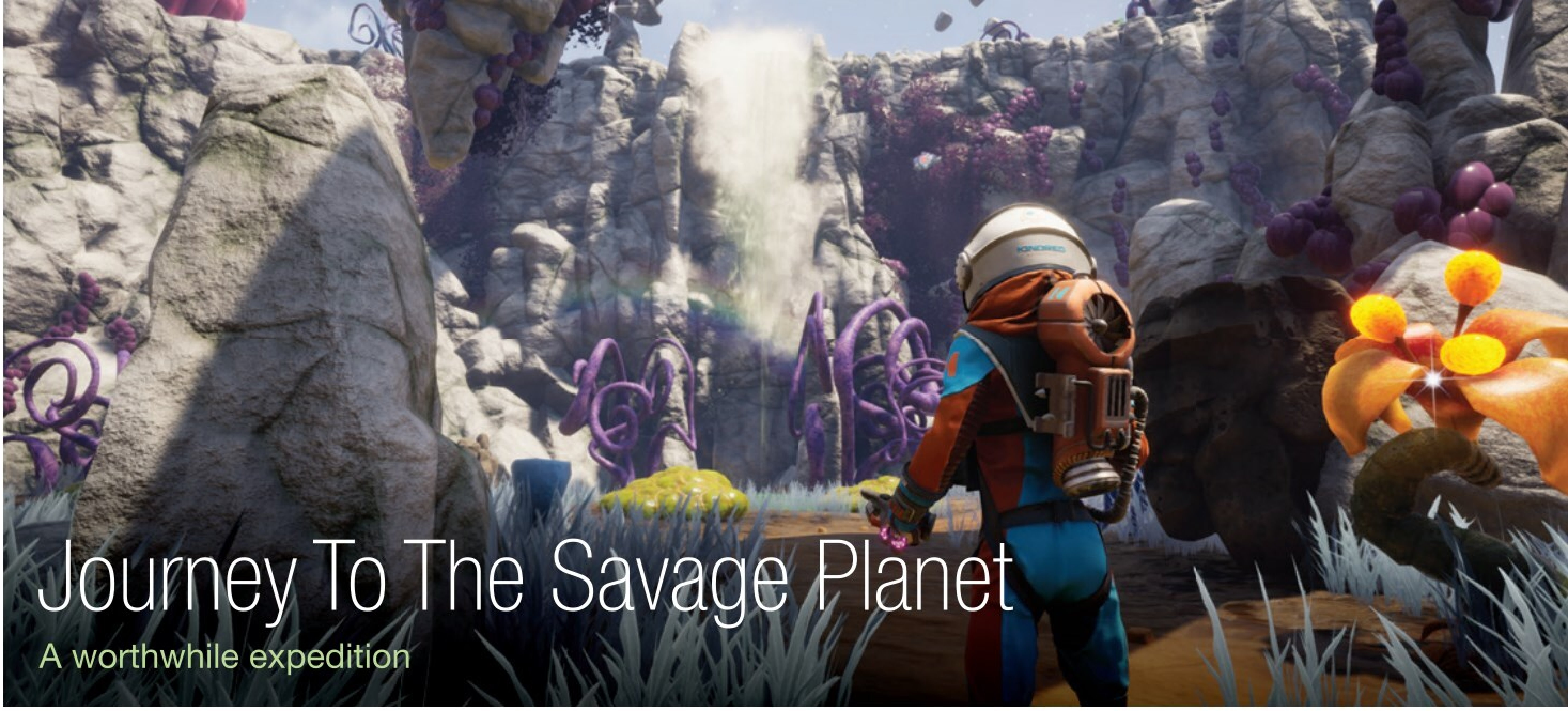
Developer Cardboard Computer has been releasing pieces of Kentucky Route Zero as acts and interludes over several years. Now, the acclaimed adventure game has reached its conclusion, and the complete experience is a dream-like journey unlike anything you've played before.

You start with the simple goal of delivering some antiques, but that objective propels you down an extra-dimensional highway dotted with surreal events and unlikely companions. The twists and turns of Kentucky Route Zero are hard to predict, and even harder to forget.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Wearing the same shirt as a co-worker, right?

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings



Journey To The Savage Planet

A worthwhile expedition

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** 505 Games **Developer** Typhoon Studios **Release** January 28 **Rating** T

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Your adventure in Journey to the Savage Planet doesn't start with much promise; as a member of the fourth-best company in space exploration, you arrive on a remote planet with lackluster equipment, incorrect intel, and insufficient fuel for the return trip. With so much going against you, it's a miracle you can get anything accomplished. Thankfully, with a planet full of unique wildlife, fun discoveries, and plentiful resources, things aren't so bad after all.

The titular savage planet is AR-Y 26. This unassuming name hints at just how little your company thinks of the place. Much to your surprise, not only is it teeming with life, but a giant spire towers over your landing spot, indicating some form of advanced civilization. However, there's no sign of that species anywhere, so your scouting mission quickly gets a secondary goal of figuring out what happened – a mission that becomes more enticing as you learn about the planet and the creatures that came before you.

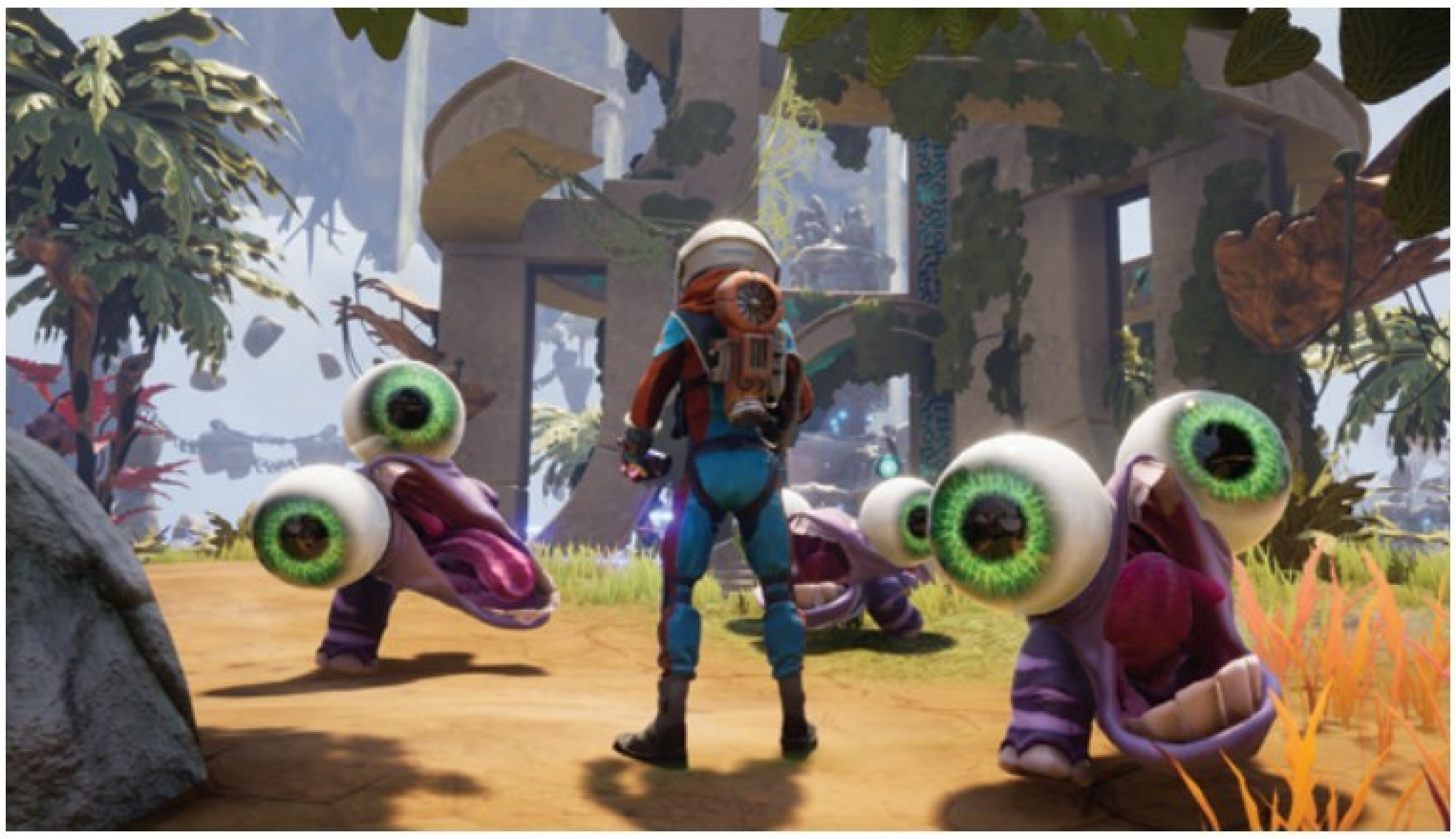
The early objectives in this first-person experience are centered on getting your bearings and scanning the surrounding area, which is about all your equipment allows for. However, exploration quickly proves rewarding. For example, I found (and ate) a mysterious orange goo behind a waterfall, bestowing permanent health and stamina upgrades. In addition to 100 orange goo pods, you also find alien alloy (which can be used in crafting), as well as resources dropped by creatures and caches. Cracked walls, high ledges, and grapple points hint at secrets worth exploring, with lore-based discoveries like alien tablets and explorer logs that provide you with videos and messages explaining what happened before your arrival.

You can craft a better battery for your pistol, plus thrusters that give you a double jump, but new crafting options open as you complete sidequests. I love having the option to expand the crafting tree to reach more meaningful rewards like an explosive charged shot, more powerful bombs, and even interface overlays that reveal the locations of nearby collectibles. Even if you don't want to deviate from the main mission, you still unlock handy traversal abilities like the ground pound to smash through brittle floor, or my personal favorite: a grappling hook to swing from specific points like Spider-Man. Each of these upgrades opens new possibilities for exploration, giving you a reason to return to areas you thought you finished.

As much I enjoy discovering the various secrets, the act of reaching them isn't always fun. First-person platforming is difficult to get the hang of due to your restricted field of vision, making some platforming sequences harder than they should be. Another problem is the gunplay, which is adequate at best. While your primary weapon is upgradeable with faster reloads, increased damage, and a bigger battery, shooting enemies never feels fun. Aiming is imprecise no matter how you tune the sensitivity, and hitting moving or small targets often proves even more upsetting than the challenging platforming sequences.

If you'd like to chart the planet with a friend, you can jump into an online co-op session. Players scale to the host's abilities, meaning your friend who hasn't played more than a couple of hours has access to all the late-game gear you've unlocked. While the two co-op explorers aren't able to play off each other in any meaningful way, having an extra gun in encounters or an extra set of eyes to spot secrets is immensely helpful.

Journey to the Savage Planet presents you with a well-constructed world full of fun collectibles to hunt down and interesting wildlife to survey, but the way the world design encourages and rewards exploration is its biggest accomplishment. » **Brian Shea**



» **Concept**
Explore a colorful and dangerous alien planet to uncover its mysteries

» **Graphics**
Bright colors and cute monster designs make even the most dangerous areas on the planet a delight to look at

» **Sound**
Dynamic music reacts during encounters and ratchets up the tension. I regretted choosing the dog character from the start, as I got sick of hearing its whimpers every time I took damage

» **Playability**
Navigation is easy thanks to an intuitive waypoint system and easy-to-understand controls. The game isn't particularly challenging, but floaty gunplay and hit-or-miss platforming can make sequences harder than they should be

» **Entertainment**
With fun discoveries galore, I was always excited to step back onto the surface of this uncharted world

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

DragonBall Z: Kakarot

Flawed but still enthralling

8

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** CyberConnect2 **Release** January 17 **Rating** E

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
A lengthy action/RPG experience that prioritizes combat and struggles with side content

» Graphics
Although many story sequences only consist of talking heads, the big moments are presented beautifully through animated in-engine sequences that look just like the show

» Sound
The soundtrack and character voices are fantastic. Some open-world chatter is repeated too often

» Playability
The combat controls are spot-on, and flying around the open world is an empowering delight

» Entertainment
Some of the content is hit or miss, but the story is told nicely throughout and ends up being an enjoyable way to relive these sagas

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot frequently powers up to Super Saiyan levels to deliver awe-inspiring battles between godly beings who can topple mountains with atomic blasts and swing fiery fists to knock each other into the stratosphere. However, when the fight is over and one of the warriors is sent to the afterlife, Kakarot struggles to find a pulse within its sprawling open worlds.

Holding true to the 100-plus *Dragon Ball Z* television episodes it's based on, Kakarot is an uneven experience with explosive highs and cratering lows. Amid the ups and downs, it delivers enough charm and hard-hitting moments to be enjoyable for a lengthy 40-hour playthrough. Some of the content feels like filler, but I was thoroughly entertained by the battles and retelling of the wild Dragon Ball Z story.

No footage from the animated show is used, and we instead see Goku and his family's life unfold through beautifully animated in-engine footage for the dramatic moments, and animation-free conversations for the relationship building and mundane story beats. Most of the voice cast from the TV series reprise their roles, once again bringing these characters to life in clever and over-the-top ways.

Since the game covers the Saiyan Saga through the Buu Saga, players take to the skies as a variety of characters. Each is similar in build for the base moves, but with a little different flavor in their attributes and super attacks. No matter who you are using, combat is fast and frantic, pushing you to dart through the skies, pepper foes with fire blasts from afar, and then get in close for quick combos. When a foe is stunned or at a specific range, the big moves like Spirit bomb and Super Kamehameha can be used to deal serious damage. In the standard open-world battles, a fair bit of strategy comes from prioritizing targets and bouncing between foes. The boss battles, which can be against a foe with millions of hit points, push you in a different way, where you are more defensive and looking for windows to unleash the heavy arsenal or rejuvenate ki (which is essentially your magic meter).

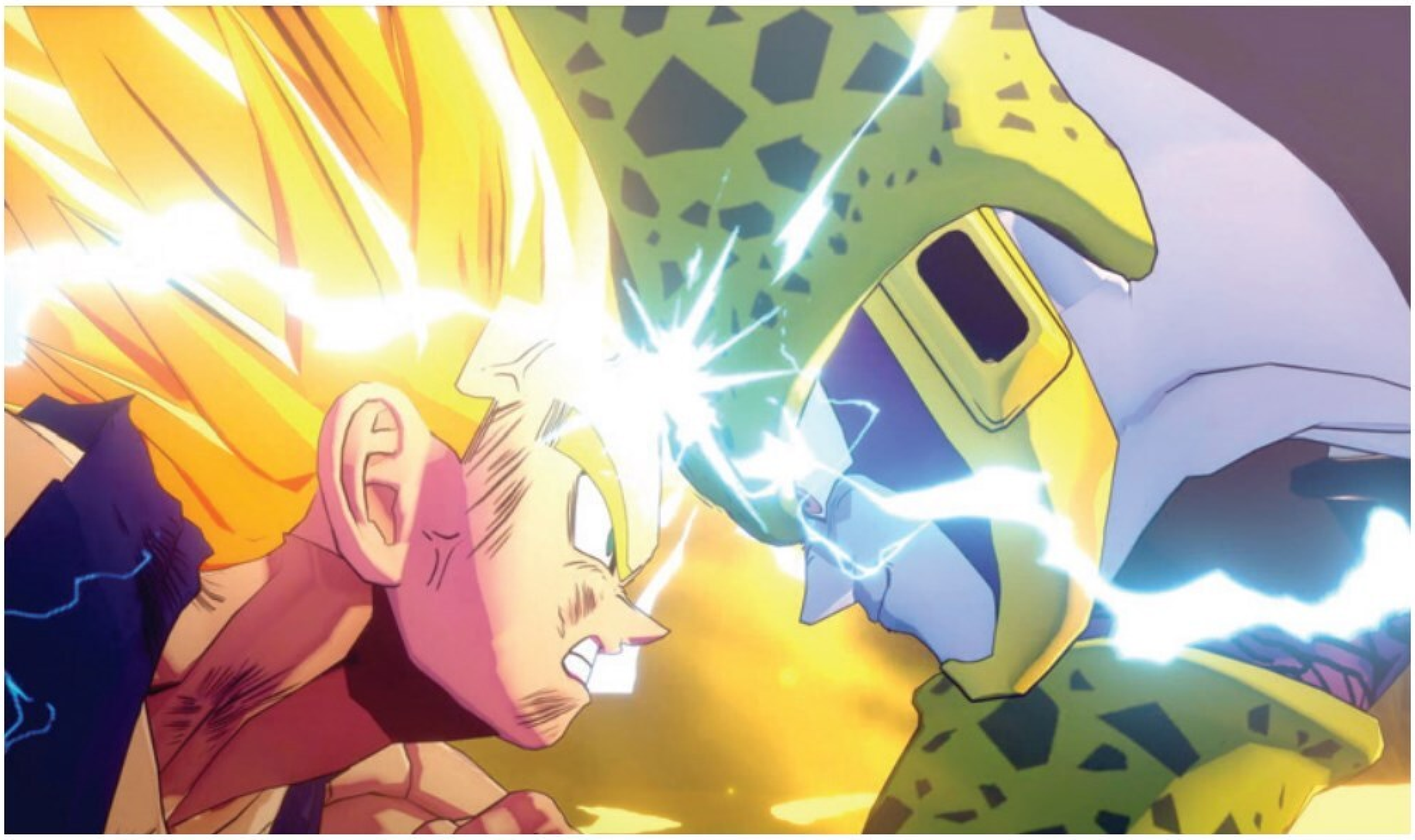
Combat is satisfying, both against low-level foes who you can eventually one-hit kill, and against enemies that are a higher level than you. These battles can last for up to 10 minutes, require plenty of healing items, and reward you well with plenty of experience points and loot.

The thrill of controlling a powerful hero continues within open-world exploration. Each character flies with the strength and speed of Superman. Flying is an enthralling means of travel, but ends up being the one truly enjoyable part of the open worlds, of which there are over a dozen to explore. Outside of flying around to collect orbs that can be used to buy new special moves, these areas aren't much fun. Sure, you can hover in the air to take down a dinosaur or spaceship for crafting materials, but no danger or skill is involved. You're essentially just ripping across the land to gather supplies. Side missions are periodically thrown at you, but if they don't involve combat, you're not doing anything entertaining – unless you like the idea of picking apples. The fishing minigame is too repetitive, and the checkpoint car races are too easy, but they do deliver nice rewards, which are sometimes Soul Emblems.

If you love collecting every minifigure in the Lego games, you will likely find similar appreciation for the 80-plus Soul Emblems you can track down. While you don't get new playable heroes from them, Soul Emblems are the key piece of Kakarot's most rewarding RPG system. Once obtained, a Soul Emblem can be placed on one of seven different community boards, each giving stat boosts to unique fields like combat, cooking, and more. Soul Emblems represent relationships with certain characters, and you have to think about which board the character on the emblem should be on. You can also figure out who they should be positioned next to for relationship links and even bigger bonuses. If you track down the best emblems, you can even give yourself a 100-percent boost to battle experience, or reduced cost for item purchases.

Kakarot also offers huge skill trees for all of the playable and support characters (who help you in combat), but they are gated by the story. That means even if you have millions of orbs to spend on new skills, you can't until you reach a specific level or story beat. Limiting progress makes sense in terms of the story flow (you can't have Goku going Super Saiyan 3 in the Frieza Saga), but it does take some of the fun out of collecting orbs. Another problem comes from the story itself, which switches who you are controlling without warning. If you pump all of your orbs into Piccolo's skills, you may not get control of him again for hours. These jarring switches can sometimes hand you an underpowered character for a big battle. You're just kind of along for the ride, never really knowing who you will be controlling for the next story mission.

If you approach Kakarot for the story and the harrowing battles, it can be amazing. Outside of collecting Soul Emblems, the RPG elements are mostly lacking, even if they do push you to keep leveling to take on harder foes (of which there are plenty in the nicely designed endgame). All told, CyberConnect 2 gives fans a fun way to reexperience this saga. » **Andrew Reiner**



Kingdom Hearts III Re Mind

A series of letdowns

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix
Release January 23 (PS4), February 25 (Xbox One) **Rating** E10+

Kingdom Hearts fans are used to crazy plot twists and cliffhangers that leave them with more questions than answers. The core Kingdom Hearts III experience finally provided resolution to hanging threads, but the Re Mind DLC muddied those waters and made me feel toyed with. Re Mind was an opportunity for Square Enix to provide additional context and shore up the story's weaknesses. Instead, this add-on feels more like a director's cut, with only a few new scenes and tweaks to battles. It offers flashes of worthwhile content, but Re Mind demands too much of players to see it.

Re Mind takes you back to the Keyblade Graveyard sequence – the start of the base game's final stretch. Sora travels back in time to search for Kairi, hoping to alter the outcome of events. However, to do so in this DLC, he sacrifices his corporeal form. I don't want to spoil anything, but the overall story is incomprehensible and outlandish. Expect drawn-out explanations for all the hearts and vessels, more time-travel talk, and unresolved beats dangled in front of you as if they'll be explained soon – but they won't.

To make matters worse, you get thrown into a sequence you've already played through, fighting every Keyblade Graveyard boss in mostly the same places. Going through the motions rewards you with a few new scenes and battles that can play out differently. A couple are new, but most of them play like they did before. To shake things up a little, you get the opportunity to play as keyblade wielders other than Sora, like Aqua, Roxas, and Riku, who have different fighting styles. For instance, Roxas has access to a quick reversal, dual wields, and is more melee-focused. The best part of these fights is the cool team-up attacks that are representative of their bonds and determination. While I enjoyed these moves, they don't make up for the high amount of reused content and the sparseness of new scenes.

The DLC is at its best when it adds some new elements to fights. One boss battle combines all the core characters, alternating between them as you perform finishers, which creates a spectacle to behold. In a separate showdown, you even get to control Kairi, which fans have been begging for. Sadly, it's only one battle, and I don't care for her moveset because she uses floaty attacks that don't feel powerful. I had to double-check to see if my strikes were even connecting, since I couldn't feel the impact of obliterating foes with Kairi as I could with other heroes.

That seems to be the trend for this DLC; nothing feels substantial. You get very little for your investment, and none of the seemingly exciting teases ever lead anywhere interesting. A great example of this is getting to explore more of Scala Ad Caelum, a breathtakingly beautiful place that was only featured briefly in the main game. After getting a closer look at it, it's more disappointing than intriguing, and full of tedious puzzles like lining up objects to match shadows. Also disappointing is that the Final Fantasy characters are still mostly absent. You see Yuffie, Aerith, Cid, and Squall, but their roles are minuscule.

Once you complete Re Mind, an episode called Limit Cut unlocks, granting you access to several challenging boss fights. They're ultra-tough, and one false move (like not blocking at the exact right moment) means you lose everything. These are comparable to the series' secret bosses (e.g., Sephiroth), which are notoriously difficult but rewarding to defeat. Those who revel in besting these can spend a lot of time here. But a warning: If Sora isn't high-level (which is probably the case if you only completed the main quest in Kingdom Hearts III), you probably won't stand a chance. Expect to have to go back into the world to grind for levels and items

Overall, Re Mind is disappointing. Between all the reused content and few additions to the story, I felt like I wasted my time. Yes, a few new threads and pieces of info are there to unravel, but they are the tiniest of crumbs. The biggest revelation is in the new secret movie, which shows the series potentially moving in a strange direction that makes me more uneasy than excited. Ultimately, you really have to dig for the fun in Re Mind, because it's buried in all this content you've already played.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

6.5

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
Play through an extended cut of the finale, complete with new scenes, new characters to control, and updated battles

» **Graphics**
Nothing has changed much from the base game. Some new team-up attacks look cool, though

» **Sound**
This is still an area where Kingdom Hearts III excels, but some of the voice acting is poorly mixed

» **Playability**
The controls are smooth, and new moves and fighting styles make for great combos

» **Entertainment**
This DLC has a lot of recycled material, and the payoff for trudging through it again is low

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Kentucky Route Zero

A surreal road trip

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Concept**
Deliver some furniture, meet other travelers, and things get more complicated from there

» **Graphics**
The graphics are simple, but they are used in cinematic and unconventional ways to surprise you

» **Sound**
Atmospheric sound design sets the right tone, and a few brilliant musical moments are expertly deployed to great effect

» **Playability**
Characters occasionally get caught up on environments, but movement and interactions are generally straightforward

» **Entertainment**
Though it seems to be a traditional adventure game at first, this is an enticing and bizarre tale unlike anything you've played before

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 323

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive, Cardboard Computer (PC)
Developer Cardboard Computer **Release** January 28 **Rating** T

As Kentucky Route Zero opens, an aging delivery man with a faithful dog by his side pulls his truck into a gas station. The man's name is Conway, and he needs directions to 5 Dogwood Drive so he can make his final delivery of antique furniture. That's the game's narrative frame, but with each passing scene, you learn Kentucky Route Zero is about other things – like community, debts, and uncertainty. Plot beats punctuate the journey, but the evocative scenery, bizarre mysteries, and imaginative writing are even more compelling. Think of Kentucky Route Zero like taking a road trip, but the places where you stop are only half the fun; the other half is deciphering the signs and arrows along the way, contemplating what lies beyond the horizon of the roads you're not taking.

If that all sounds too ambiguous and artsy, then this game may not be for you. At its most grounded, Kentucky Route Zero is an adventure game suffused with magical realism. At its most fantastic, it is a collage of pure dream logic. You meet android musicians, a giant eagle, and glowing skeletons. You drive down extra-dimensional highways, watch experimental performances, and question the shape of reality. In short, Kentucky Route Zero is delightfully weird. It is focused intently on ideas rather than traditional puzzles or obstacles – but as a piece of interactive art, it's poignant and enthralling.

The story unfolds primarily through text boxes and dialogue choices. You start by controlling Conway at the gas station, but you dip in and out of the lives of many others as the cast expands over the course of five acts. The writing deftly portrays a bleak world with lonely inhabitants, and though your decisions can't exactly change that, you aren't just advancing text like a visual novel. Players still have a sense of agency. This can come from something as simple as deciding a mundane detail about a character's past, like why Conway's parents were reluctant to let him watch TV. Some choices have immediate outcomes, like deciding which lyrics come next in the song you're hearing. Other options – particularly in Act IV – are important because they lead to certain scenes at the exclusion of others.

Kentucky Route Zero's approach to player choice is fascinating because it is impossible to optimize outcomes. No decision is better than another; you have no good or bad consequences, no scenes are more beneficial than others, and you can't change the trajectory of the overall story. What you're left with is the freedom to define the tone and mood of the events and interactions, which is more gratifying and powerful than I expected. How haunted are the characters by their pasts? How guarded are they around strangers? Your answers to those questions may not result in a grand branching narrative, but they still affect your perception in cool ways. It reminds me of a page in a coloring book, where you control the tint and shading, but the black outlines of the big picture are the same.

Also like a coloring book, the blank spaces can be just as interesting as those you fill in. Kentucky Route Zero revels in its strangeness, and rarely pins down details with clear exposition. This intentional vagueness usually frustrates me in games, but I enjoy it here. It works because the game never promises what it can't provide; it raises questions and presents mysteries, but doesn't feel like it's building toward big revelations that never come. Instead, it mixes quiet moments and inexplicable phenomena, then invites your imagination to explore the fuzzy boundaries of the fiction.

Kentucky Route Zero was successfully crowd-funded in 2011, and the first act launched in 2013. The game is now complete, with the subsequent acts and interludes releasing sporadically over the last several years. Even so, the flow doesn't feel disjointed; each new act feels like a natural expansion as the world and characters blossom. In fact, they may blossom a little too much; by the end, the characters and story beats are too numerous and diffuse to coalesce into a fully satisfying finale. I won't spoil it here, but even my relative disappointment at the conclusion reinforces something I love about the rest of the experience: Kentucky Route Zero is about appreciating the journey, not reaching the destination. » **Joe Juba**

To The Moon

New moon, same cycle

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** X.D. Network **Developer** Freebird Games **Release** January 16 **Rating** E

8.25

Switch

» Concept
Two doctors attempt to fulfill a dying man's last wish by reconfiguring his memories

» Graphics
Inspired by 16-bit RPGs, To the Moon looks like an old SNES game

» Sound
The soundtrack is a bit repetitive, but the main piano-driven theme is moving

» Playability
You spend most of the game reading dialogue boxes, but a few simple puzzles interrupt the narrative

» Entertainment
To the Moon is incredibly story-focused. Fortunately, that tale is powerful and heartfelt

» Replay Value
Moderately low

On an isolated stretch of road near a lonely lighthouse, two doctors march toward a cliffside mansion. They have been hired to rewrite the memories of an old man named Johnny Wyles in order to fulfill his dying wish of going to the moon. This isn't a simple process, and as the doctors dive into Johnny's mind and revisit several of his most important memories, they effectively relive his life in reverse. To the Moon may be light on gameplay, but it is a storytelling powerhouse that explores the themes of love and regret, and by the end, I felt encouraged to reflect on some of the most important relationships in my own life.

In 2011, designer Kan Gao released To the Moon on PC. For Gao, its development was a way to work through several existential questions he'd encountered when he learned about a life-threatening condition facing his grandfather. That original 2011 release used the RPG Maker XP toolkit, which gave To the Moon an old-school charm, but Gao's heartbreaking story was the real reason To the Moon stood out in a pack of pixelated indie darlings. Almost a decade later, To the Moon is on Switch, and the entire game has been rebuilt in Unity. The visual overhaul is slight, but it retains the old school charm of the original release.

Fortunately, the narrative has been completely untouched, because it remains incredibly powerful even a decade after release. As players explore Johnny's sometimes mundane and often heartbreaking life, they encounter several strange mysteries. For example, why is his house full of origami rabbits? Why does his wife seem obsessed with lighthouses? And why does Johnny's mother call him Joey? The revelations to these miniature mysteries are often as surprising as they are heartbreaking. You spend most of the game reading and clicking through text boxes, but the dialogue feels natural, and I was genuinely interested to see how Johnny's big life events would play out. Overall, To the Moon's narrative is well-paced and kept me glued to my Switch's screen until the credits rolled.

While this experience is largely narrative-based, it has a few gameplay moments. As you jump from one memory to the next, you collect a series of mementos of Johnny's life. You do this by inspecting significant objects within the environment of each memory. These mementos aren't hard to find, but collecting them sometimes feels like a chore since the process is so simple. Once you collect all five mementos in a given space, you complete a simple puzzle before jumping to the next memory. During these picture puzzles, you flip columns or rows of tiles until all the tiles are flipped over and you complete a picture. I got hung up on one of these puzzles, but for the most part, they are shallow experiences that don't add much to the overall package.

Fortunately, To the Moon's narrative is so heartfelt and touching that its superficial puzzles didn't diminish the adventure. To the Moon forced me to think about my own life and regrets and asked me what I would change if I could. I may not have a machine that can rewrite my memories, but if I did, I wouldn't want to forget this game.
» Ben Reeves

Smash
Provoke

7.75 SaGa Scarlet Grace: Ambitions

Platform PS4 • Switch • PC • iOS • Android **Release** December 3 **Rating** T

I love so many of the ideas behind Scarlet Grace and its inventive nature, but it can't assemble those elements into a consistent experience. Scarlet Grace has its flaws and frustrations, but it also colors outside the lines of the genre. Sometimes that's good and exciting. Other times, it's just scribbles.

– Kimberley Wallace

reviews archive

STADIA

Darksiders Genesis	6.5	322

PS4

Afterparty	7.75	320
Age of Wonders: Planetfall	8	318
Arise	8.75	322
Borderlands 3	8	319
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	8.75	320
Code Vein	6.5	320
Control	8.75	318
Death Stranding	7	320
Destiny 2: Shadowkeep	9	320
eFootball PES 2020	8	319
FIFA 20	7.5	320
Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers	9	318
Ghost Recon Breakpoint	6	320
GreedFall	7.25	319
Grid	7	320
Indivisible	7	320
Knights and Bikes	8	319
Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III, The	8	320
Life is Strange 2	8.5	322
Lonely Mountains: Downhill	8.75	321
MediEvil	6.5	320
Monster Hunter World: Iceborne	8.25	318
NASCAR Heat 4	7	319
NBA 2K20	8.5	319
Need for Speed Heat	8	321
NHL 20	7.5	319
Outer Worlds, The	9.25	320
Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville	7.75	321
Remnant: From the Ashes	8.5	318
River City Girls	7	319
Sayonara Wild Hearts	7	320
Shenmue III	6	322
Shovel Knight Showdown	7.5	322
Sojourn, The	6.5	320
Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order	8.75	321
Surge 2, The	8.5	320
Wattam	7.25	322
Wreckfest	8.5	319
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	8.5	320

XBOX ONE

Afterparty	7.75	320
Age of Wonders: Planetfall	8	318
Arise	8.75	322
Blair Witch	7	319
Borderlands 3	8	319
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	8.75	320
Code Vein	6.5	320
Control	8.75	318
Destiny 2: Shadowkeep	9	320
eFootball PES 2020	8	319
FIFA 20	7.5	320
Gears 5	8.5	319
Ghost Recon Breakpoint	6	320
GreedFall	7.25	319
Grid	7	320
Indivisible	7	320
Life is Strange 2	8.5	322
Lonely Mountains: Downhill	8.75	321
Monster Hunter World: Iceborne	8.25	318
NASCAR Heat 4	7	319
NBA 2K20	8.5	319
Need for Speed Heat	8	321
NHL 20	7.5	319
Outer Worlds, The	9.25	320
Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville	7.75	321
Remnant: From the Ashes	8.5	318
River City Girls	7	319
Shenmue III	6	322
Shovel Knight Showdown	7.5	322
Sojourn, The	6.5	320
Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order	8.75	321
Surge 2, The	8.5	320
Wreckfest	8.5	319
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	8.5	320

SWITCH

Astral Chain	9	318
Daemon X Machina	5.5	320
Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening, The	9	319
Luigi's Mansion 3	8.5	320
Neo Cab	8	320
Pokémon Sword & Shield	8.75	321
River City Girls	7	319
Sayonara Wild Hearts	7	320
Shovel Knight Showdown	7.5	322
Untitled Goose Game	7.5	320
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	8.5	320

PC

Afterparty	7.75	320
Age of Wonders: Planetfall	8	318
Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey	5.5	319
Arise	8.75	322
Blair Witch	7	319
Borderlands 3	8	319
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	8.75	320
Code Vein	6.5	320
Control	8.75	318
Darksiders Genesis	6.5	322
Destiny 2: Shadowkeep	9	320
Disco Elysium	9	321
eFootball PES 2020	8	319
FIFA 20	7.5	320
Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers	9	318
Gears 5	8.5	319
Ghost Recon Breakpoint	6	320
GreedFall	7.25	319
Grid	7	320
Indivisible	7	320
Ion Fury	9	318
John Wick Hex	8	320
Knights and Bikes	8	319
Life is Strange 2	8.5	322
Lonely Mountains: Downhill	8.75	321
Magic: The Gathering Arena	8.75	320
Mosaic	8.75	322
NASCAR Heat 4	7	319
NBA 2K20	8.5	319
Need for Speed Heat	8	321
Neo Cab	8	320
Outer Worlds, The	9.25	320
Planet Zoo	7	321
Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville	7.75	321
Remnant: From the Ashes	8.5	318
River City Girls	7	319
Shenmue III	6	322
Shovel Knight Showdown	7.5	322
Sojourn, The	6.5	320
Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order	8.75	321
Surge 2, The	8.5	320
Telling Lies	9	318
Untitled Goose Game	7.5	320
Wattam	7.25	322
World of Warcraft Classic	9	319
Wreckfest	8.5	319
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	8.5	320

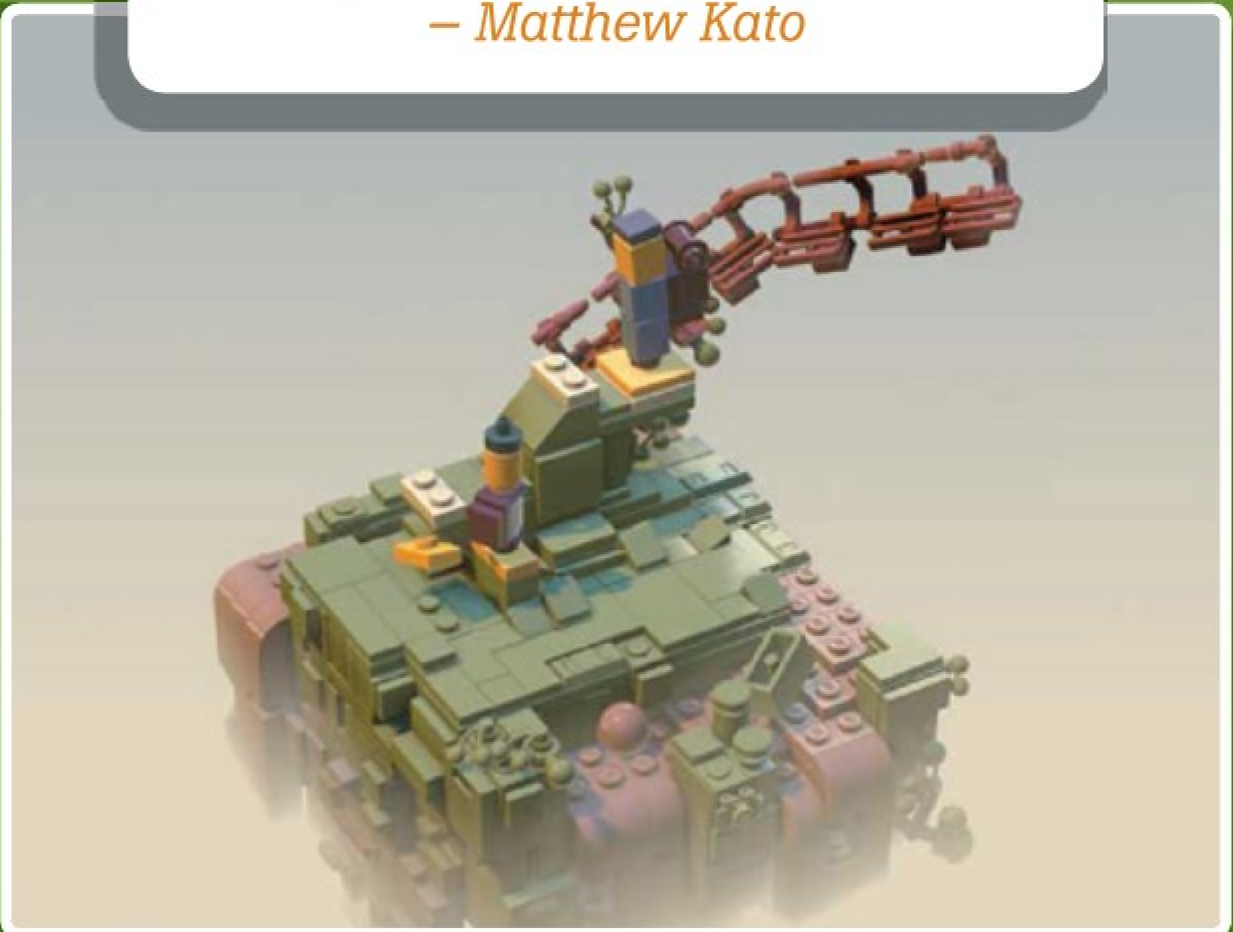
iOS

Mosaic	8.75	322
Neo Cab	8	320
Sayonara Wild Hearts	7	320

7.5 Lego Builder's Journey

Platform iOS **Release** December 19 **Rating** 4+

Lego Builder's Journey doesn't give you the total freedom to build what you want, but it taps into strong feelings – problem solving and the satisfaction that comes with it. The game is a good start to what I hope is an evolving franchise.
– Matthew Kato



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STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com
Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com
Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com
Senior Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com
Senior Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com
Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com
PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com
Digital Editor
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com
Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Video Producer
Leo Vader leovader@gameinformer.com
Video Editor
Alex Stadnik alexstadnik@gameinformer.com
Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com
Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com
Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Graphic Designer
Jen Vinson jenifervinson@gameinformer.com
Web Designers/Programmers
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Kristin Williams kristinwilliams@gameinformer.com

Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com
Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paul@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Borm rob@gameinformer.com
Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com
Senior Advertising Sales Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com
Advertising Manager
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com
Marketing Coordinators
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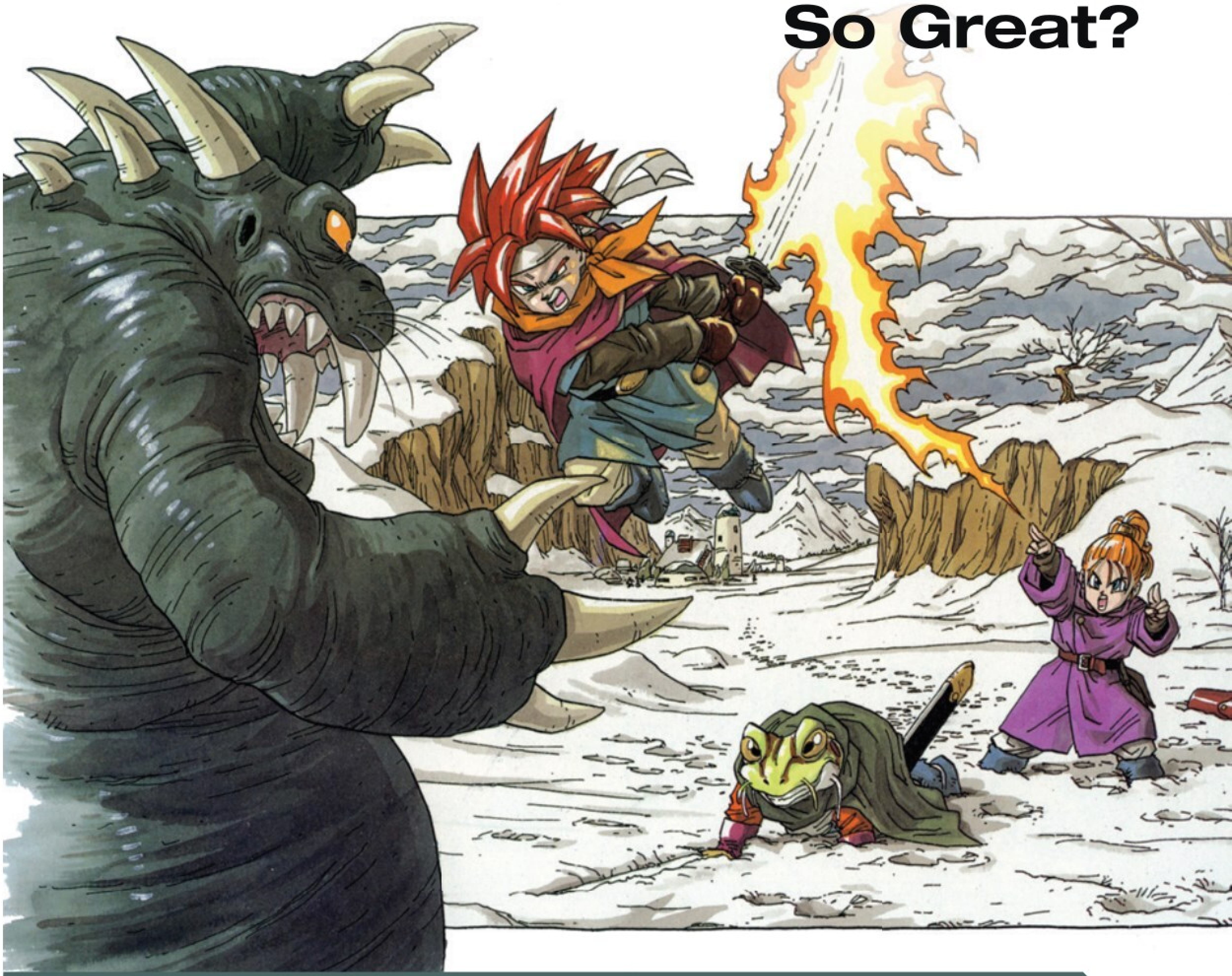
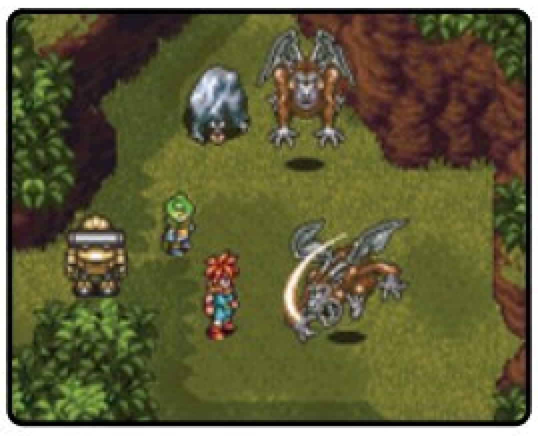
What Makes CHRONO TRIGGER So Great?



by Joe Juba

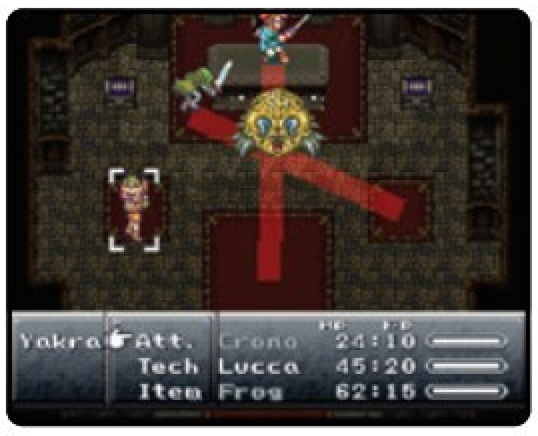
Any serious debate about the best role-playing game of all time needs to include Chrono Trigger. The game was created by a dream team of developers, including supervisors Hironobu Sakaguchi (Final Fantasy) and Yuji Horii (Dragon Quest), character designer Akira Toriyama (*Dragon Ball Z*), and many more. This exceptional team crafted a gorgeous, surprising adventure that shed old genre conventions to strike off in bold new directions – and established new conventions for the games that followed.

This groundbreaking, time-hopping tale originally launched on March 11, 1995, and it has remained in the hearts of RPG fans ever since. If you haven't played it yourself, you may not fully understand the reverence for this old SNES game – so let us help. In celebration of its 25th anniversary, we're looking back on just a few things that truly set Chrono Trigger apart.



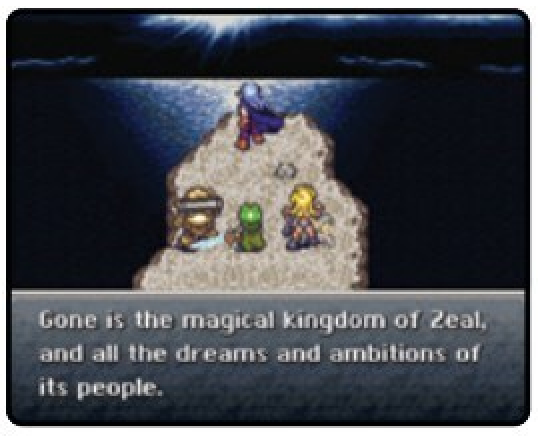
DYNAMIC BATTLES

Combat is a major part of Chrono Trigger, but it's more than random encounters against predictable enemy groups. You can usually see your foes before a fight begins, and the encounters take place right on the field map – no transition to a separate screen. This keeps the battlegrounds distinct and exciting, and brings positioning into play. Enemies' relative distance (and how closely they are grouped together) can affect their attacks and yours, adding tactical variety that keeps combat from getting too repetitive.



TEAMING UP

All of your characters learn new attacks and get stronger individually. That's standard RPG fare, but Chrono Trigger's big innovation is how your party members join forces. Dual techs let two characters combine separate skills into a single move with a bigger payoff (both in terms of damage and visuals). Crono and Frog's sword slashes come together as X-Strike, while Lucca and Marle's fire and ice spells create Antipode. This concept gets even more rewarding when you start obtaining triple techs, which let all three party members combine their powers for screen-clearing super-moves. Whenever a character learns a new skill, half of the fun is trying it out, but the other half is seeing how it pairs up with other allies' abilities.



Gone is the magical kingdom of Zeal, and all the dreams and ambitions of its people.

RECRUIT THE VILLAIN

Your most formidable foe in the first part of the game is Magus, a sorcerer bent on conjuring an apocalyptic beast. His plot fails (thanks to the heroes' intervention), but then something surprising happens; Magus can join your party. This is exciting because you've been on the receiving end of his powerful dark magic already, but now you get to wield these extraordinary abilities yourself. Even though he fights on your side, Magus' personality doesn't change; you share a common foe, but he is still ultimately evil. This kind of unlikely ally is a clever twist on traditional party composition.

MULTIPLE ENDINGS

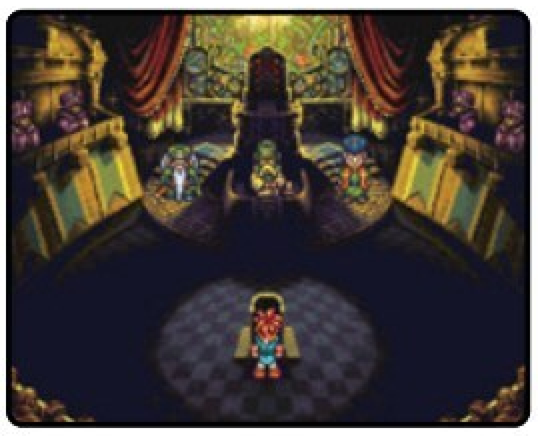
On your first time through the game, you get the normal ending. But if you load up new game+ afterwards, you can see 11 additional endings. On your second playthrough, you can challenge the final boss at almost any time, and the ending you receive depends on the point in the story you initiate that encounter. These new endings aren't exactly canon; many of them are "what if" scenarios that give you more insight into the characters, but they are fun to see anyway. One hard-to-get ending even lets you talk to in-game versions of Chrono Trigger's development team.

NEW GAME+

Chrono Trigger coined this now-common term. With new game+, players start the story over from the beginning, but are allowed to carry over the levels, skills, and items from their end-game save files. Yes, this trivializes most of the difficulty on a second playthrough, but it also means you can just focus on enjoying the journey and discovering the little touches you may have missed the first time around. New game+ remains one of the most entertaining and popular ways to add replay value to a game.

THE MUSIC

Despite Nobuo Uematsu being the most recognizable composer on the project, most of Chrono Trigger's music is the work of Yasunori Mitsuda. Today, Mitsuda is an industry veteran with a long list of impressive credits (including Mario Party and Xenoblade Chronicles), but Chrono Trigger was the first game he scored. However, it doesn't sound like an early effort; the soundtrack is fantastic, whether you're fighting monsters, watching a story scene, or exploring dream-like kingdoms. The audio landscape is a key factor in establishing Chrono Trigger's unique, otherworldly vibe.



THE TRIAL

A few hours into the story, the hero Crono is apprehended for allegedly kidnapping a princess (he didn't). He's then put on trial in one of Chrono Trigger's most striking and memorable scenes. As witnesses are called and scenarios are recounted, players see their previous choices influence the jury towards a verdict. Did you steal a man's lunch? Did you find a lost cat? In a time before RPGs had pushed into player choice, it was remarkable to see your prior actions acknowledged – especially since you had no idea they would come back to haunt you.

KILL THE HERO

Characters die in RPGs. Villagers, soldiers, wizards – any journey is bound to have some loss along the way. However, the list of casualties rarely includes the star hero. That's another big way Chrono Trigger surprised players back in 1995; no one expected the death of Crono himself. And yet, he gets disintegrated during a confrontation with the world-ending entity named Lavos. It's not a permanent death, since you can complete a series of optional tasks to bring the silent protagonist back to life, but it still hits hard.

THE YEAR 2020 ACCORDING TO VIDEO GAMES

If you want a wildly inaccurate picture of what sports, technology, or politics might look like one day, play a video game. Of course, no one can predict exactly what the future holds, but games are especially bad at it. For example, take a look at gaming's collective vision for 2020 based on these games that supposedly take place this year. ***by Joe Juba***

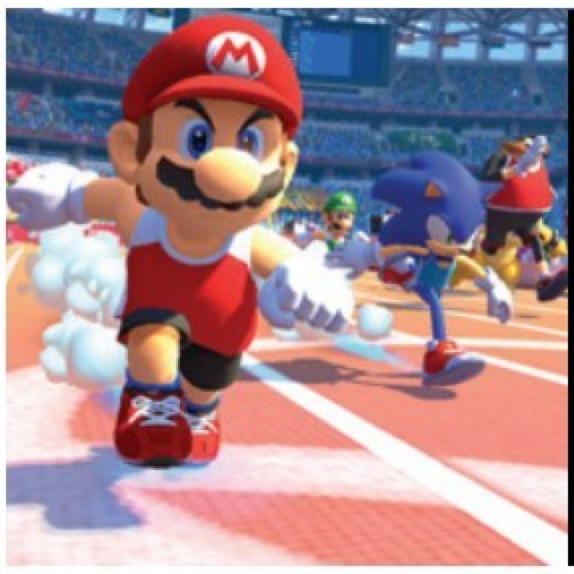
Those hoverboards everyone has wanted since Back to the Future II are finally widely available and approved for highway use.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time (1991)

TS-TM
0 0
POWER UP
OK!

The sport of baseball is exciting to watch now – mainly because they added robots and jetpacks.

Super Baseball 2020 (1991)



Mario and Sonic are competing in the 2020 Olympic games in Tokyo.

Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 (2019)

Our soldiers wear super-powered Nanosuits specifically designed to combat an alien threat.

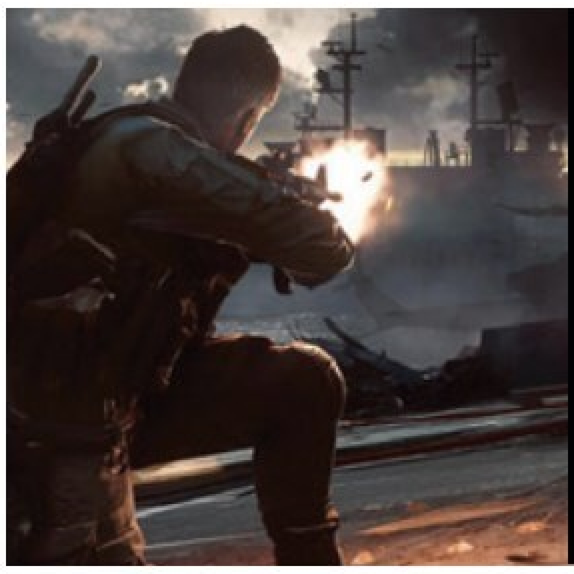
Crysis (2013)

Crude oil costs $800 per barrel, which means a gallon of gasoline costs upward of $20.

EndWar (2008)

Joanna Dark is a cool and relevant bounty hunter people recognize.

Perfect Dark Zero (2005)



The United States, China, and Russia are embroiled in a geopolitical chess match that brings them to the brink of war. [Oh, nevermind, please ignore this one. – ed.]

Battlefield 4 (2013)

A popular sport is watching horrifying genetically engineered monsters mutilate each other.

Beast Wrestler (1991)

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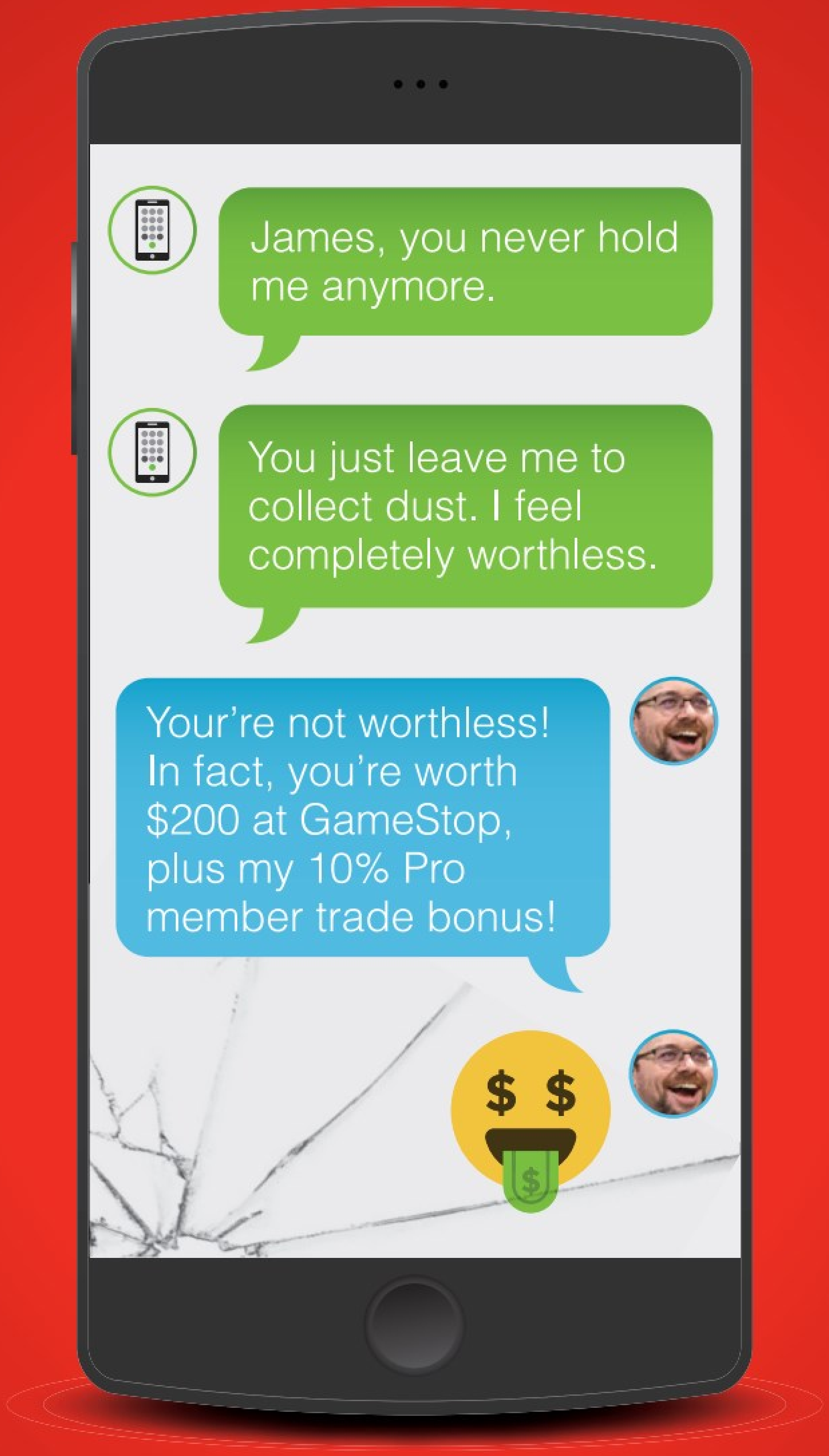

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Issue 323

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